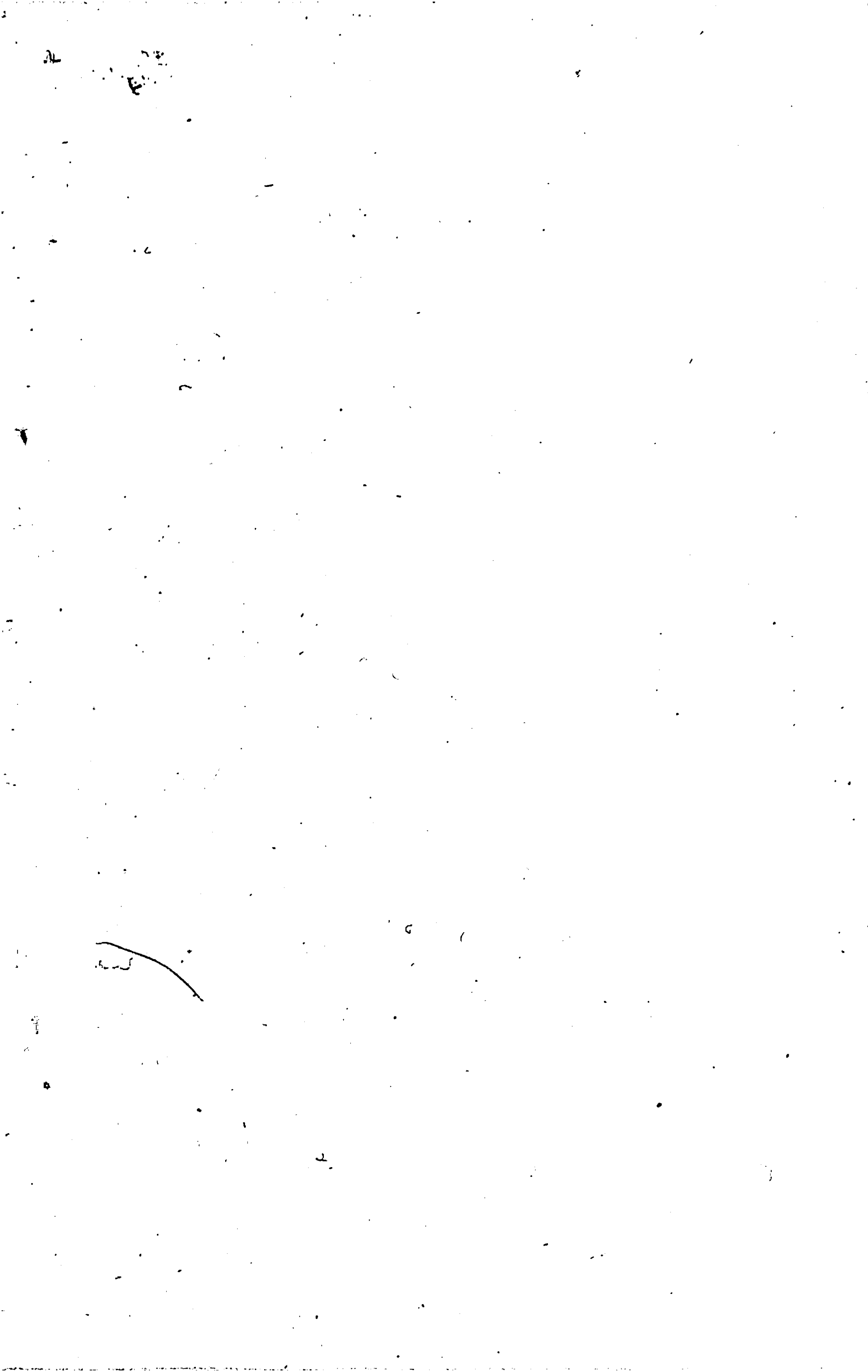


Nirankari Baba

Balwant Gargi



1973
THOMSON PRESS (INDIA) LIMITED
PUBLICATION DIVISION

Published by Thomson Press (India) Limited, Publication Division, 29 Netaji Subhas Marg, Delhi–110006, and printed by Aroon Purie at Thomson Press (India) Limited, Faridabad, Haryana.

Contents

1

Bombay Journey

AS THE NIRANKARI Baba, Rajmata (his wife) and I arrived at Palam airport we were received by a white-turbaned man in military uniform along with 20 khaki-clad soldiers. We entered the main hall and heard the announcement that the plane would be an hour late.

I walked about impatiently while Baba and Rajmata setttled down on a bench like two ordinary passengers—he, holding his stick, and she, her handbag. When I turned back after a few minutes I saw a crowd of people surrounding them. Some fell at their feet and offered currency notes. The crowd swelled. An airport official requested them to move into the V.I.P. lounge, where the three of us relaxed over coffee until the plane arrived.

Previously I had met Baba at a private dinner in Chandigarh, then in Delhi at his huge annual function. Also I had attended several Nirankari *sangats* (meetings) when I was doing an article on him for a magazine. His vast following had always baffled me.

My drama classes were over for the summer and my wife and children were in Simla waiting for me

to join them when I received Baba's message to meet him in Delhi for the journey to Bombay.

We sat together in the plane. The previous evening there had been a terrible crash, killing 48 people right on the edge of Palam airport. Two of them had been friends of mine—Gurnam Singh, the slim, vigorous-for-75 new Indian High Commissioner to Australia; and the Communist leader, Satish Loomba, in whose house I had dined many times. As our plane raced down the strip for the take-off, I was afraid, and despite being an atheist mumbled the Sanskrit *mantra* my father had taught me.

Rajmata was looking out of the window; Baba with his streaming iron-grey beard and pure white costume of turban, kurta-churidars, starched muslin holy shawl, white curly-toed Punjabi shoes and white socks, sat immobile. His hooked walking stick, a religious sceptre, rested by his side. We didn't talk at all for one hour. Baba read the paper, had roast mutton sandwiches and coffee brought by the air hostess, and wiped his lips fastidiously with a crisp white handkerchief.

My thoughts wandered to various sadhus and gurus. Mahesh Yogi, who was discovered by the Beatles and sky-rocketed to fame; Balyogeshwar whose 700 disciples flew with him in two chartered planes from New York to see him off in India; Satya Sai Baba, the Miracle Man with fluffy afro-style hair. And now this Baba by my side whom his followers call 'the Messiah of the Modern Age'. I looked at him again. If I didn't know his identity I would have taken him simply for a pleasant, soft-spoken, wealthy landlord.

I asked, "What do you think of Satya Sai Baba?

Is it really possible to produce an apple from the air, or a Swiss watch? Or to blow on a stone and turn it into crystal sugar? These feats certainly aren't jugglery. What are they?"

Baba replied, "We call them *siddhis*—super-normal powers, or *bhoot vidya,* which means 'ghost science'. With yogic discipline, one can develop one's psychic power to concentrate on an object and produce it at will. Sai Baba may have it. It's nothing new. Many yogis develop this power. But such miracles do not give one mental peace. No inner light. They dazzle like a flash of lightning but they are not the constant light by which one can read a book . . . I mean, they do not revolutionise a society. They attract people who want the sensational, which I do not advocate."

"Do you believe that thought can control matter?"

"Yes, it's possible. Our psychic world needs exploration. Our ancient yogis went too deeply into the mind and lost touch with the outer reality. We must be in touch with both the realities. Also, a man endowed with *siddhis* can become proud. He may misuse his powers and finally lose them. No permanent impact . . . my spiritual power is for peace, love and transformation of the individual soul." After this Baba fell into a thoughtful silence.

The plane was landing. When we stepped down the sky was overcast and there was a damp, salty tang in the air. I saw three men walking to us, each holding a garland of stringy marigolds. They put these around Baba's neck, Rajmata's, and mine also, fell at Baba's feet, and got up saying 'Dhan Nirankar' (Glory to the Formless). As we walked towards the airport, a photographer clicked flash photos, hopping backwards. It was a mini reception.

The balcony was crammed with people who had come to see off their friends and were waving. Baba strode briskly, holding his stick. At the entrance of the airport a crowd milled about, carrying thick garlands of large marigolds and roses. I thought they were for some minister or a foreign delegation. Suddenly they rushed towards Baba and Rajmata and heaped them with garlands, shouting, 'Rajmata Gurbachan Avtar ki jai!' (Victory to the Royal Mother and Baba Gurbachan—the incarnation!) The hall continued to resound with this and other similar slogans. There was a stampede. Hundreds of people thronged the hallway and it was difficult to wade through them as they pelted the holy couple with flower petals. From somewhere a hundred jawans in khaki appeared and made a long corridor through which the holy couple was led to an improvised platform outside the building where a throne covered with maroon velvet had been set up for them.

Baba and Rajmata sat down, and a tall man with a large silver-handled fly-whisk of the type used in Sikh temples started fanning them. Cymbals clanged and drums thundered as a big crowd of devotees started dancing and humming before the throne. In this mad, deafening ecstasy, Baba sat with a benign smile and Rajmata beamed. A woman came up and garlanded them both with one huge necklace bristling with fresh 10-rupee currency notes. The devotees started filing past, offering Baba money and receiving his blessings. As each one laid one or more currency notes at his feet, Baba patted his head. The crowd was swelling in spite of the drizzle, and there was the problem of traffic control. The leader of the local reception committee stood up and waved his

hand to stop the music and announced that everyone should go to the bhavan, where they would be able to continue receiving the Baba's blessings.

The crowd melted. Baba and Rajmata (who is always with him) got into a car specially decorated with flowers. I sat beside them and we headed towards the bhavan. Slippery wet roads ... crowds of people ... backwaters of the ocean and early marshes now reclaimed and covered by rising apartment houses ... Maratha women in indigo and green and magenta saris ... on the horizon, tall chimneys belching smoke ... I felt the power of the big city—as it brought to me a sense of relief from the provincial existence of Chandigarh: the intense energy and protection of the city one senses when returning after a long absence. A local leader, Rishi Vyas Dev, sat in the front seat and talked in a low voice about the coming programme, and personal details which I did not like to overhear.

It was almost dark when our car entered the gate of the Nirankari Bhavan. It was illuminated with coloured lights and hundreds of small multi-coloured bulbs garlanding the hedges and trees of the two-acre grounds. In the centre stood the two-storey, nine-room principal building. The top front-room was decorated with streamers and lights for the holy couple.

It started pouring. I watched from the verandah as the tents, canopies and carpets set up in the open compound were shifted to the big assembly hall which stands like a manor-house in one corner of the compound and has a seating capacity of 4,000 people. All this was done with a great discipline and quietness.

I returned to my spacious room which had a wall-to-wall grape-green carpet and a huge double bed

fitted with side stands.

Baba was resting in the opposite room. A guard in khaki uniform and white Gandhi cap stood outside his door. There was a hushed atmosphere. Several dozen most intimate devotees slipped in and out and then Baba was left alone to get ready.

Music and sermons had already started in the assembly hall and I could hear them over the loudspeakers. This went on for almost an hour. Then I heard sky-rending shouts of 'Rajmata Gurbachan Avtar ki jai!' I realized that Baba had gone to the hall to bless his devotees. At once I hurried down and found the grassy compound humming with people. The rain had stopped. A guard led me to the assembly hall where I saw Baba and Rajmata sitting on a flower-decked throne, backed by a star-spangled hooded canopy which was floodlit in red from below. This throne was on a huge platform where chanters, drummers, sermon-givers and senior Nirankaris sat. I was given a place on the edge of the platform from which I could see the hall crammed with people sitting crosslegged and standing several deep along the walls. There was none of the perfunctoriness and boredom visible in most of the institutionalized religious gatherings. Here the people were attentive and cheerful. A long double file of Sindhi and Maratha men and women, Sikhs, fish wives, small businessmen, turbaned old men, and young mothers with babies passed Baba and Rajmata from two sides. They laid currency notes at Baba's feet, bowed their heads and after receiving his blessings came down through the central aisle and sat on the overcrowded floor.

The double line of devotees moved around the hall and out of the far-off main door. I got up and followed

it out of the door, across the compound, through the gate, into the street and down for three blocks—almost a quarter mile long! Every devotee anxiously clutched a currency note of one to ten rupees and patiently inched forward in perfect order. A newly-wedded couple had a garland of 10-rupee notes to present to Baba for his special blessings. I returned to the dais to listen to the music of tiny cymbals, harmonium and high-pitched singing which continued throughout. A tall old man fanned Baba. Women sat on the left side and men on the right, leaving a central gangway for worshippers to walk down and take their place among the audience after being blessed. Songs were sung in different languages—Marathi, Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali, Kannada, Sindhi, one even in Nepalese.

An old woman with a leathery and deeply-lined face kissed Baba's feet with great love. A tall Maratha overcome by emotion, bent and held his guru's feet. A young Konkani woman of unusual beauty rubbed her lips on Baba's toes. All this was done in quick succession but with great intensity, freezing each moment.

About three thousand people passed like this from 8 to 10 p.m. After two hours of bestowing blessings, Baba raised his hand to signal that it should end. Rishi Vyas announced over the microphone that Baba was now going to address the gathering and that there would be no more time for receiving offerings until the following day. The long queue found places to sit or stand, with several thousand over flowing into the compound.

Baba spoke for half an hour, in a simple ordinary manner—no 'pulpit tone'. His voice was a gentle monotone, a reflective, on-the-spot sharing of his

thoughts. One of his disciples chanted verses from various scriptures linked together by a common theme and Baba interpreted these to the people, a few at a time so that the chant and the sermon alternated. He said, "Sometimes we forget God, and even feel we have lost Him. Where is God? You do not see Him, but He is deep inside each of you. At night you can see the stars, but on a cloudy night like this one you cannot. Still you know they are there. During the day the sun shines and at night it sets, yet you know that it is still in the sky. If a heavy fog were to descend, you would not see anything. Some people have such a fog from the material objects around them that they lose sight of God. Only your true guru, like a strong sun, can clear away this fog and enable you to see God. You do not have to renounce the world to find God; rather, you must continue to perform all your functions in life. The spiritual life must be led side by side with the physical . . . I have no rituals to impose, no particular recitations to prescribe, no penance to impose on you. I speak to the human being in all of you, and not to members of particular religions, communities or nationalities... You cannot reach God by arrogance or cleverness or riches. But only by humility and love; total surrender and faith."

Baba then wove in a parable about a bandit who had his eye on a beautiful, silver-hoofed black horse owned by a fakir. The fakir was always on his horse, riding daily through the woods, and there was no way for the bandit to steal it. One day the bandit disguised himself as a cripple, sat on the path and whined for help as the fakir rode by. The fakir offered him a ride and helped him to mount and settle be-

hind. The bandit pushed the fakir off, and dug his heels into the horse's side to make him gallop away. The fakir picked himself up out of the dust and cried out, "Oh God's man, stay! Listen to me! Just one word! The bandit pulled at the reins and stopped. "What is it?" The fakir said, "Don't tell anybody that you deceived me. If you do, nobody will again trust a cripple." The bandit was so impressed by these words that he dismounted and fell at the feet of the fakir. Through such selflessness and humility, the fakir transformed the bandit into a saint. "Selflessness and love are the basic requisites of a Nirankari. Armed with these godly qualities, each of you Nirankaris can help transform the world, with your Baba by your side."

Baba shut his eyes, raised his hand in benediction, and the assembly broke into a final shout, 'Rajmata Gurbachan Avtar ki jai!'

On the second day it rained in the afternoon and continued heavily till evening. Rishi Vyas was worried about the arrangements for the congregation. Puddles deepened in the compound, and buffaloes shivered in the backyard mooing in deep guttural tones. The open-air community oven was filled with water and the roads were flooded.

At 7 p.m. the chanters in the main hall commenced the *sangat* by singing hymns and drumming. I expected a nearly empty hall because even the local electric train service had failed. At 8 p.m. Baba and Rajmata came out of their room. They and I were led across the compound under dripping umbrellas by uniformed *sevadars* (volunteer soldier-devotees). To my surprise the hall was full with a pervading odour of flowers and sweat.

A Maratha in a red turban was singing in a powerful voice: "We are Nirankaris, we are Nirankaris, we are Nirankaris..." and three accompanists were lustily repeating this refrain. The singer was Arjun Raghunath, a mill worker from the milkmen's clan. He exuded vigour as he powerfully grimaced and opened his mouth wide, showing his red, betel-stained tongue and throat. As he reached the climax of his song he was delirious and the people were swaying their heads and clapping in rhythm. Arjun's singing was followed by various small groups of singers in different languages ... Meanwhile Baba and Rajmata were jointly blessing the unending queue of devotees. The rain stopped, the last in line received benediction and Baba began his sermon: "If you are humble and honest and have faith in your guru all your tensions and problems will resolve themselves. Even today's vast food problem can be resolved not only by government action but even more effectively by spiritual action. It is a man-made famine. If each one of you is ready to share his morsel there will be no more hunger..."

Emphasizing the spiritual necessity of continuing to shoulder one's worldly responsibilities he declared, "You can't run away from life. Only that soldier is great who proves his mettle on the battlefield. If a general sits at home wearing his medals and sword, nobody will consider him brave. He has to remain on the battlefield. Only by fighting the battle of life—but with a sense of detachment—you will be living as God intended you to live on earth. At the same time one should not forget God by losing oneself in the luxuries and material goods of life. What would you say of a wife whose husband brings her a beautiful

Banaras sari and who praises the sari but forgets her husband? Such a person cannot reach God."

He illustrated his point by a story from the *Ramayana:* "Lord Rama was not pleased with his rich arrogant devotees but with the poor, untouchable tribal Bhil woman who fed him wild berries. She first tasted each one herself to be sure that they were sweet. As Rama ate these half-nibbled berries he considered them most precious gifts. People who shun others, consider a scavenger's touch polluting, and think they are keeping more pure by refusing to eat from anyone else's hand, are missing the taste of life and Oneness with the Universal Spirit..."

Eleven women in silk saris and jasmine-trimmed hair and carrying lighted worship lamps in brass trays, walked, with jingling anklets, up the gangway from the main central entrance. Each woman was from a different community. They stopped before Baba to perform the *arati.* As six men sang a hymn in honour of Baba the women rotated their worship trays with fullbodied clockwise motions. Their faces shone in the light of the lamps. Suddenly, out of the singing chorus the red-turbaned Arjun jumped with his tambura into the little arena in front of Baba. He was followed by the two cymbalists and the drummer. He began singing and dancing with his tambura while his colleagues pounded their instruments. This sent a wave of passion through the assembly. Several men from the audience leaped into the arena and started dancing. The women had moved to one side with their worship lamps and swayed in unison. Baba and Rajmata sat locked together in a huge, bristly garland of currency notes which had been enthusiastically given by a couple blessed with their first son.

A bald man in a white dhoti snapped his fingers and reeled with mincing steps. The rhythm quickened and the audience started clapping hands with the beat. The melody accelerated and the words became a single refrain, "Mehma teri aparam paar" (Inscrutable are your ways, my Lord) to the same tune which Mahatma Gandhi used in his prayer sessions. The words became rhythmic gasps. Enthusiastic devotees pelted the holy couple with rose petals and the fragrant shower fell even on the dancers. This fast tempo injected a new frenzy into the worshippers, who danced like whirling dervishes. In ecstatic abandon they lost themselves in the rhythm and went into a trance, becoming one with their God. At this peak of intensity everything abruptly stopped. The audience shouted the slogan to Baba and Rajmata and the hall resounded. This was the finale of the programme.

2

Personal X-Rays

FROM THE PREVIOUS night's *sangat* I had picked out a handful of people—a young Christian girl; a snaggle-toothed old man; a thin Maharashtrian woman with a nose ring and her tall husband with a face like a carved rock; a short-haired student in mustard bellbottoms; and a sensitive-featured beautiful girl who, I learned, had risen from the labouring class to become a switchboard receptionist. Her face particularly fascinated me.

I asked these people if they could come to see me the following morning at the bhavan and each one agreed. They sat on the terrace on charpoys, mingling with devotees waiting to see Baba. A voluntary guard called them in, one by one, and shut my door against all disturbance.

A woman in a flowered maxi dress and wearing a small silver cross around her slim neck came in first. Before I could stop her she swiftly bent down and touched my feet, then settled on the carpeted floor.

"What is your name?" I asked.

"Maria."

"Are you married?"

"Yes, three years ago to a saxophone player."

And then Maria told me her story:

"He would go to play at jam sessions or cabaret dances and came home drunk. We had nothing in common, though in the beginning I had fallen in love with him because of his saxophone. During the day, I worked as a typist in a shipping company. One day I learnt that he had entertained a film extra in the house when I was at work. When I came home early in the afternoon and found her there, I flew into a rage and hurled my purse at her. My husband dragged me away by the arm and slapped me. The woman left but it was hell to live with him after that. I suffered this torture for a few months, then left him and went to stay with a friend, a Sindhi girl with whom I had been at school. She embraced me and gave me lot of courage. But I was very sad—confused, dejected, afraid of men. One evening I accompanied my girl-friend to a *sangat* because she was a Nirankari. There I met Babaji. He gave a purpose to my life and brought my God near me. Here, in my heart. I love everybody at the *sangats* and feel peaceful. By touching the feet of a fellow being I get a thrill. A beautiful light. Also I have developed a strong will. If I wish for anything strongly it comes true, with my faith in Babaji."

Maria emanated a true tenderness as I observed her later at a *sangat* where she led people to their seats and helped them with their children.

I was busy scribbling notes when I was startled by a hand on my feet. It was the snaggle-toothed old man who had entered so quietly.

He gave his name as Jessaram Teoomal Keswani and told me he was a retired storekeeper in the Army

workshop in Poona. His pension was meagre but his daughter, a teacher, and his married son and wife were contributing to the joint family treasury.

Jessaram said, "I had a terrible temper. I got so angry that my body would shiver and shake. I am a worshipper of truth. And you know, love of truth is always accompanied by wrath. I could not endure lies or cheating. I sent five people to jail after litigation . . . to uphold the truth. My family was afraid of me and so was everybody else."

"Now you no longer get angry?"

"Sometimes, but not so terribly. If I get into a rage my family has only to speak the words 'Dhan Nirankar'. This acts as a splash of cold water over boiling milk and I simmer down. These words are magical . . . like 'Open Sesame'. The word 'Nirankar' has opened for me caves of spiritual gold."

Every time Jessaram emphasized a word or a thought his head jerked forward and his eyes revealed their whites. Was it ecstasy? Or did he feel dazed by his own transformation?

Certainly he was happy. His movements were quick and nimble and I could sense his delight in life, a desire to immerse himself in the service of his fellow men.

The first two visitors had touched my feet. After that I sat like a Muslim with my legs tucked under myself to keep away the rest of them from doing the same, touching my feet. Sitting on my cushioned divan I felt a sense of power and freedom to talk with my visitors, who sat before me on the carpeted floor. I asked them questions which I would not have otherwise dared to ask with the probing frankness of a psychoanalyst.

A dark thin woman with a nose-ring came and greeted me with bent head and sat down at my feet. "You wanted me, sir. Is it for a photograph? What is this about?"

"About you," I answered. "Tell me how you joined this fraternity. Are you a Hindu?"

"Yes. A Maharashtrian Hindu. I was six years old when my father died. My mother worked in a tobacco factory. I completed my primary school and was married off in my teens to a good but very hot-tempered man. I have five children—four daughters and a son. My husband worked in the Customs Bureau."

"His pay?"

"He did not tell me, but now he is drawing about 1,500 rupees. He wanted to keep me happy but would lose his temper and fly into a rage over any little thing so that I didn't know what to do. His features would change, his nostrils spitting fire, his eyes smouldering, and he would roar. I felt so miserable that I wanted sometimes to commit suicide—to sprinkle kerosene on my clothes and set myself on fire, or jump before a rushing train. Or just run away. Then a lady took me to a *sangat* where I saw men and women greeting by touching each other's feet and then they sang. Their Baba blessed them from his throne and a long queue of people received his benedictions. I also felt the touch of his hand on my head—a sense of protection and fearlessness and freedom. There was tremendous warmth there. That evening I took the *gian* (divine knowledge) from Rishi Vyasji and greeted my fellow Nirankaris by touching their feet as they touched mine."

She continued, "When I returned home my husband

was waiting for me, and was very angry. He demanded to know where I had been. When I told him about Babaji and my new friends he lost his temper and beat me. I went on talking about Babaji and he beat me harder, until I collapsed on the floor and my daughters started screaming. He left me sobbing there and went away to the docks. There he exhausted his anger by walking for hours and came back very late. The following day he said, 'Don't go there again. These Punjabis are clever rogues. I know these sadhus and gurus. Two of them were arrested in Delhi for abducting women. Crooks! I won't let you go to these meetings.' I was sad for a week and then my husband agreed to accompany me to a *sangat*. Vyasji was giving a sermon and said, 'Anyone who does not recognise God is a beast.' My husband thought these words were being aimed at him. He got annoyed and took me away. I was not allowed to go to the *sangats* again for a month. Then my husband suddenly allowed me to take my young daughter. Soon I realised that he was spying on me through her. After attending three meetings she also took the *gian* and was on my side.

"One evening we returned late and my husband demanded to know why. What had we been doing there? What was Baba saying to me? Before I could reply he whipped out his strong leather belt and started slashing at me. 'Speak, harlot! Speak, pimp of your daughter! Where did you go? What were you doing there so late?' I fell on the ground sobbing my Guru's name, which sent him into such a frenzy that he beat me until I became unconscious. Hearing my shrieks, neighbours gathered outside our house but nobody dared to interfere. My daughters

were weeping in the courtyard but nobody could save me. A doctor was called and it took me two months to recover. My husband was ready to go to jail for murder because he could not endure the idea that anybody else besides himself had won my devotion."

So saying, she smiled, revealing teeth stained red with betel juice and said, "My husband is outside. Shall I call him?"

"Yes," I answered. I was curious to meet this brute who had such strong ideas of male honour.

She went out and soon returned with a tall granite-faced Maratha. He was Rajaram Govind Bagkar. He confirmed all that his wife had said and continued, "I thought some crook had hypnotized her. This country is full of religious frauds. I didn't believe in any god though I was born into a devout Hindu family. We Marathas cannot live without worshipping something—shrines, statues, lingams. And so many saints. Every Maratha household has a little niche for some god. I'm a rationalist and don't believe in what I cannot see. I have been very arrogant and many times lost my temper over trivial things. Blood rushed to my head when I found my wife going to a Punjabi guru. I could have killed her that evening and was ready to go to the police for it if she had not fallen unconscious first. Afterwards she promised never to go to that fellow again. She kept her word. But that did not satisfy me. I wanted to drive his ghost out of her head."

His eyes flamed red as he recaptured that incident. He was silent for a minute. He looked at his wife and said, "Once I came from the office and she fell at my feet weeping. I asked 'Why these tears?' She replied,

'I feel happy touching my lord's feet.' I sensed the lie. I knew which lord she was referring to. Also I sensed her pain, like that of a trapped animal. I felt a twinge of guilt and the desire to be generous. So I told her that she could go to the *sangats,* but only once a week. She answered, 'Only on the condition that you will never stop me again.' "

He continued, "I worked in the shipyard and was a terror. One day when my wife returned late at night from a *sangat* I dragged her into the room, bolted the door and started hitting her with my belt. She went on saying, 'My Nirankar is with me. My God is with me. My Nirankar is with me!' This so infuriated me that I shouted, 'Show me your Nirankar! Let that Punjabi Baba save you from my beating!' And I started hitting her harder. She collapsed on the ground, blood flowing from her mouth and one of her arms fractured. I was perspiring with rage. I was ready to kill her and hang for it. I opened the door. The neighbours had gathered around. I called the doctor and told him everything, and that if she died I would gladly go to the gallows."

He suddenly smiled and his rock-cut features had a certain nobility, "I allowed my wife again to go to the *sangats.*"

"Why?" I asked.

"So I could send my elder daughter to spy on her. She went with her mother three times and then she also took the *gian.* Boiling with rage I shouted 'Harlots! He has hypnotized both of you!' In disgust I left my house and stayed out all night. The following day under some perverse impulse I quit my job. This was to humiliate and punish my wife and children. Let them starve! Let them die! I wanted to see them

in rags in the street. A cruel passion surged through my veins. I was fighting gross ignorance, a blind dark well. My wife looked hideous to me."

"Did you go to any other woman?"

"No. I was too consumed by hate. I squandered my remaining money and all my savings. Not a penny was left in the house. I roared, 'Now call your God and let him feed you!' Sometimes I felt as if I were a character out of some mythological drama, playing the role of a demon to test the devotees of some god. I was bent upon stripping the last shred of honour from my family; eager to see them shivering naked in poverty. Also infuriated by their patient non-violence. They were like grass—trample it but it never stays down. I could not break their will. In frustration I went out and wandered all day. In the evening when I came there was food in the house which the Nirankari community had brought for them. I understood that this was social service, as performed by many communities. But how could the Nirankaris declare their Baba a prophet?"

Both husband and wife sat silent for a little while as I scribbled notes furiously. Then I asked, "How are you living now? Do you have another job?"

They both bowed their heads. The husband answered, "Yes. The same job. That seems a miracle. But before that something happened."

"What?"

"Rishi Vyas came by chance to our neighbourhood asking to borrow a drum. My wife met him in the street and told him we had one. She had not been to the congregation for months and also warned Vyas never to come to her house for fear that I would insult him. Which I would have. Yet seeing him then, I felt

no anger. He was a pleasant man with a kind smile and voice. I offered him our drum, which he accepted gratefully. As he was leaving he said, 'I am going in a jeep to various villages to convene meetings. Would you like to come with me?' I was doing no work and my desire to know the truth prompted me to accept. I went with him and for one month attended every *sangat,* eating and talking with him and sleeping in the same room. I watched everything critically. There was nothing hidden about Vyasji's functioning. It was very open and simple. In the process I was converted. When Babaji came, I felt like bowing my head before him and touching his feet—which I had never felt like doing in my whole arrogant life. And I became a Nirankari. Now I love my wife and children; no more quarrels. Ours is a very happy, peaceful family now. The Nirankaris taught me humility, tolerance and love, and these have become the cardinal principles of my existence."

"How did you get back your job?"

"By the grace of the Babaji. He put his hand on my head and said, 'Everything will be all right.' When I came home that evening I found a letter from the Customs Department requisitioning my services again. The Indo-Pakistan War had broken out and they needed me. They gave me one rank lower. But that does not matter at all. I am drawing in total about 1,400 rupees a month now. That is enough. I am happy."

Then came the girl in bellbottoms with a psychedelic embroidered T-shirt. Roopbala Sachdev gave an impression of freedom and carelessness. I asked, "What difference has the Mission made in your life?"

She replied, "Most people in the Mission are simple. Innocent. They move me. Nirankaris are always

warm-hearted. I feel safe with them and therefore free."

"Do you believe in free love?"

"Yes. It's a physical necessity."

"Not sinful?"

"No. I would go out only with a man I like and marry him. If I couldn't pull on with my husband, I would certainly leave him. The Nirankari brotherhood will help me—first as marriage counsellors advising us to stay together. But if that failed, they would help me to become free and find a more compatible match. My mother considers such an attitude sinful, but it's just modern."

"How does the Nirankari Mission help you now?"

"It has freed me from taboos and allows me to be myself with no apologies."

The switchboard girl entered, wearing a flowered sari with low-necked choli, and introduced herself as Silochana Shirodkar.

"What is your age?" I asked.

"Twenty-four."

"Married?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Many people have wanted to sleep with me, but not to marry me. I was 19 when my brother called me from my home town to Bombay. He was employed by a company dealing in import machinery. I had done my matriculation and had learned typing. I took a job to support myself and stayed with my brother."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"Did your brother drink?"

"Yes."

"Did he beat you?"

"Sometimes."

"Why?"

"He brought friends home. I cooked meat for them, though I don't eat meat."

"Why not?"

"In my childhood I saw goats being sacrificed to our village god. Headless bodies writhing and blood dripping. Also roosters. A rooster's head was chopped off in one stroke and the feathery bundle of flesh flapped about in agony, scattering blood. A gruesome sight. After that I could no longer choke down meat. We are coastal people. I am not a Maratha, you know. I'm a Konkani—We are a tightly-knit community and very conservative in our ways, though in Bombay they think of us differently."

She was talking rapidly, unrolling herself, throwing out half-formed sentences with references to her past and her brother which I was trying to connect. Many times I asked her to talk more slowly.

She repeated, "I don't eat meat, but I cooked it for my brother. His friends would come to drink and laugh, and sometimes use foul curses among themselves. But I would cook for them . . . like a wife."

"What do you mean—did he sleep with you?"

Silochana felt silent. Her gaze intensified and her lips trembled. "No. But his ways were rough. He would take my money and would not give back even enough for bus fare or soap. He would just say, 'Your money belongs to me but I will get you a gold chain. For Diwali. After all, I'm your brother, your well-wisher.' One evening he got drunk, roaring 'Get out! I don't want to see your face, whore! Get out! Go to other people and lie in their beds! Harlot! Get out!

Otherwise I'll smash your face with this bottle.' The neighbours gathered around but nobody would help me. They dismissed it as a domestic quarrel. I wept all night. Next morning after he left for work I moved out and went to stay with my married cousin. For three months I was there. Then his wife began grumbling and no longer wanted me in her house."

"Why?"

"Perhaps she considered me a danger. She was not pretty. Then where to go? Reluctantly I went back to my brother, who had come many times beseeching me to return and threatening that if I didn't he would never take me back. Again I cooked for him, and again the quarrels. I sent for my mother to come and live with us. One day she asked him, 'Why don't you find a man for your sister?' He lost his temper and started hitting her. I ran to save her but the devil kicked me away. My mother's front teeth broke and her head was bleeding. Again the neighbours gathered and suggested that I must be married off. But to whom? Most boys were shut out by my brother. And if anyone met me at my job he just wanted to sleep with me."

"Then?"

"My brother fell in love with a Maharashtrian girl who lived in the same building and married her. After that my mother went back home. My sister-in-law was a good, kind young woman and fond of me. But after a few months she turned against me and treated me like an outcast. Then followed six months of hell. I went early morning to my office, ate out and came back only to sleep. They charged money from me for my monthly board and lodging but she skimped on everything—no soap, no iron, hardly any food. One neighbour was a kindly Christian whose wife was

ailing. He invited me to eat with them. The Indo-Pakistan War was on. He worked the night shift and I would sleep in their house exhausted with worries. A Maharashtrian boy who had been in America fell in love with me and proposed and I agreed to marry him. The date was fixed. But a vicious neighbour went to him and painted me as a whore. So our engagement broke. Half the people in the building wanted me to get married and the rest wanted me to remain a virgin trapped in that building."

"Why?"

"They were always gossipping about me. Always spying. Every window staring and every male eye eager to undress me. Finally I shifted as a paying guest to an old woman. Loving me first as a daughter, she gradually made me a slave of her household. A most wretched existence."

"Something is wrong with you—isn't it so?" I wondered aloud.

Silochana's large eyes filled and her chin again trembled. "Yes. I invited trouble everywhere. Fate seemed against me. The old woman became a monster slowly sucking my will, possessing me. She ordered me to wash her utensils and clothes and massage her leathery skin. I hated it. One day I broke away from her and went to live with a friend who had a small place in the neighbourhood of a Shiva temple. I would go to my office in the morning and return to my girl-friend restless and exhausted. All eyes seemed to devour me. I did not know where to go."

Tears rolled down her cheeks and she broke into sobs.

After a while she wiped her eyes and said, "I worshipped Shiva in the temple next door and rubbed my

forehead on his image. But found no peace of mind. When evening fell I was afraid. One day I was returning from my office in a bus when I met a woman who had a book in her hand with a picture of Babaji. Noticing my interest, she asked me to accompany her to a meeting of her fellow Nirankaris. So I went with her. She introduced me to other people. Very cheerful. After four days I took the *gian* from Vyasji and was initiated into the fraternity. Someone touched my feet. Suddenly everything calmed in me. A sense of relief. For the first time I felt safe. In this huge city I had been a haunted soul, always afraid. Every man appeared to me a goonda. No protection. I was driven into a dark well and Bombay was pushing me down, down. Suddenly I felt protected and secure. Even confident. Babaji and Rajmata are like my father and mother. I can tell them my problems. I am a member of the ladies' volunteer corps of the Mission and I love to serve ... Now Babaji will find a good young man for me and I will get married. I trust his choice."

So saying, Silochana's water-laden eyes sparkled and she asked, "Will you have fresh tea?"

"Yes," I replied.

And she went away with the tray to prepare it.

That night I had dinner with Baba and Rajmata, in their room. They sat crosslegged on their massive, white-covered bed. An embroidered cloth mat had been spread before them and the food was brought in gleaming silvery dishes. I sat opposite them in a chair and my food was set on a small table. Vyas and his wife and their buxom niece, on a visit from Canada, served us curried vegetables, baked fish, curds, salad and spicy meat, followed by a big

platter of sliced Alfonso mangoes. As we scooped out the succulent flesh with our spoons and ate, Baba remarked, "Alfonso is the king of mangoes. Everything is best in season. Harmonious . . . But always there are disturbances in our country . . . political wrangles . . . General De Gaulle found it difficult to govern a country with 350 kinds of cheeses. But how can Indira Gandhi control a country that has 500 kinds of mangoes?" We all laughed at his flash of humour.

When we had finished and dipped our fingers into bowls of warm water, a devotee brought in a large square bowl of rich *feerini* pudding covered with silver leaf. Baba and Rajmata each took a spoonful, as they did not want more, and I also took a little, rich with sliced almonds and pistas. Then it was automatically borne away to be shared with others in the household.

This was not a typical meal. Baba eats whatever is served, without ordering anything special. But he prefers Punjabi food—thick curries and chapaties, including meat several times a week.

I asked him, "Why do you eat meat? Most holy men don't."

Baba replied, "I was brought up in this tradition and see no reason to break it. I want to refute the myth that food habits determine one's degree of spirituality. If that were so, then all the Muslims would be non-spiritual, because even their sufis and mystics have been meat-eaters. So also the Christians, who even symbolically drink the blood of the Christ in the form of wine. The ancient Brahmins even ate meat. But today we are all caught in these petty quarrels about what one should and should not eat. Hindus and Muslims have fought over pork and beef as a

religious crusade for centuries. Nirankaris do not ban any food; we only discourage immoderation."

Baba was to take the early morning plane back to Delhi and for this he had to get up at 4 a.m. So I bade him good night and retired to my room. But I asked Vyas to awaken me at the same time so that I could bid Baba a proper goodbye.

It was still dark with predawn softness when someone knocked on my door and brought in tea. Through the windows I could see the silhouettes of feathery palms, distant high-rise apartments and low hills. When I came out, the foyer was already filled with a long queue of devotees curving away out of sight. The guard let me into Baba's well-lit room. About 15 devotees including Silochana sat on the floor around his bed and Baba sat dressed but with his topknot bare. He acknowledged my greetings cheerfully and invited me to sit on a nearby chair. Before he put on his white socks Silochana leaned forward and kissed his feet, holding them a minute with tender intensity. He put his hand on her head and I could see in her face the glow of protection and confidence that his hand transmitted. Then he stood up. Rajmata came forward with her arms full of a starched white muslin turban length. Baba took one end and she, the other, and between them they pulled it into shape and gathered it into loops. Baba stood before the mirror and began tying it while she held the ends. Then she laid a white muslin shawl around his shoulders and handed him his stick.

During these three days I had seen Baba publicly enthroned as a spiritual king and privately as a very kind, gentle human being in his most ordinary moments.

This double exposure made him more believable. Performing all the simple daily functions of an ordinary man, he remained the most exalted; nothing lessened his godly image.

Dawn was breaking when the holy couple stepped out into the foyer. As they slowly walked forward, each devotee in the queue bent and laid money at their feet. Baba and Rajmata laid their hands on each head in blessing and came down the stairs to the open compound where a flagged Indian car was waiting. About a hundred people had gathered around and I wondered that they could come so early before the bus service started. They must have walked miles, leaving their homes long before their families were up. All these people, with their humble gifts of money and love, moved me.

After a collective blessing radiating warmth, the holy couple got into the car. The crowd exclaimed in unison with folded hands, 'Rajmata Gurbachan Avtar ki jai!' In the cool, clear morning calm it rang out with startling force and I could hear its fading echoes resounding in the bhavan. The car moved forward and out of the gate. Everyone stood quietly until it was out of sight.

3

In Between Is My World

AFTER BABA LEFT I stayed on in Bombay for a fortnight and met many of his followers. I was constantly curious about what drives people into his fold, and found each had something different and surprising to reveal. Men and women from the lower class tended to speak more openly about themselves, living on the edge of desperation. The middle class was a bit prudish. I did not care for their pious, generalized statements except for only those which revealed their inner selves with frankness.

One such man was Amrik Singh Sandhu, a young marine engineer from a Jat Sikh family. Tall and clean-shaven with short clipped moustache, he looked like a Pakistani soldier. He had been brought up strictly by an orthodox grandfather who rigidly adhered to caste taboos. Sandhu said, "If I played with a cobbler's or sweeper's son, I was beaten. My grandfather's strictness made me rebel later. When I left the Punjab for Bombay I stayed with my cousin-brother, a follower of Babaji. He would go out to the *sangat* every evening and I would wait for him in his room. Lonely and bored and cut off from my traditions,

I accompanied him to a *sangat* and impulsively took the *gian*. They give it to anyone who asks. Actually I wasn't ready. I attended more *sangats* and wondered why these people wasted so much time serving. For what gain? All the same, it impressed me. Gradually I began to understand the *gian* and became firm in my devotion to Babaji. He preaches only what the previous prophets have said in the scriptures. But the fact that he is saying these things in person, here and now, makes them far more credible and understandable. As I listen to him it's like my real father talking to me, supremely wise and loving. I stopped worrying about my future. I began my career at 500 rupees a month. But now, 10 years later, I'm drawing 5,000."

"How?" I gasped. "Where?"

"I'm in the Merchant Navy and live on a ship which goes all over the world. I was good at my job and got two promotions. But I have the same respect for the lowest deck scrubbers as I do for my boss. My success must have been helped by my attitude, which the Nirankaris have taught me."

I met Sandhu and his wife many times in the bhavan when they were staying with Vyas on a month's vacation and serving wherever needed. Sandhu was very honest, straightforward with an earnest gaze. Tremendously sincere, he gave me the feeling that such people as he himself, young and energetic, would give their very lives for the good of the Mission or the country.

During my stay at the bhavan Lachhmi Bai Bumiyya —a short, sturdy, tribal-looking woman—was always there. I saw her in the morning, late at night and even at dawn when Baba got up to leave for Delhi.

I was feeling lazy in Bombay's oppressive humidity which generally precedes a strong shower. Lachhmi was sitting outside on the terrace roof and smoking when I saw her and began a conversation. She told me that her husband worked in a cotton mill but had been jobless for the last two months. They were weavers by caste. She had four children—one daughter and three sons. She said: "I was married when I was 11. At 15, I bore a son who is now 20. My husband used to drink and gamble, so we were always poor."

I said, "Now you must be destitute?"

"No, things are much better now."

"How can that be when your husband is out of a job?" She drew a last deep puff on her bidi and threw it away saying: "My son is almost old enough to work and my daughter helps me manufacture hand-rolled bidis. My children were a problem but now they are a help. Soon they all will be earning . . . with the kindness of Babaji." "How does Babaji help?" "A great man talks to me—is that no help? In *sangats* I enjoy serving him and all the people. My husband used to prevent my going to *sangats*. 'Where are you going out with flowers in your hair?' he would shout. But now he has taken the *gian* and everything is fine. He is out of a job . . . but that's not a great problem when there is peace in the house."

Radha Baokar was a plump film extra in her late 30's with dark patches on her cheeks. I met her at a Sunday morning *sangat*. Afterwards Radha told me: "I began my career at 17 as an extra girl in a dancing chorus in the hope of getting a chance to play a heroine. I was good-looking and very gay and had learned five languages."

"How?"

"By working in the studios with Bengali directors, Punjabi actors, Hindi song-writers, a Telugu dance teacher, and a Maratha crew. I have worked with many stars—Dalip Kumar, Meena Kumari, Nargis and Dev Anand—I know several girls who came as extras but shot up to stardom."

"It's a lottery. No one can decide for oneself to be a star."

"Why not? For that matter this whole life is a lottery. I had dreamed of reaching the top and devoted myself completely to my profession."

"What did your father do?"

"He had a small photography shop outside a film studio. My mother used to drink and sleep with other men. My father slowly succumbed to her powerful will and was reduced to a doormat. As I grew up the neighbouring women taunted my mother, 'Your husband is a toad. From whom did you get this beautiful daughter?' Eventually I learnt that my real father was a Punjabi actor who had my mother one night in fun. He never again showed his face but I inherited his beautiful form. My mother was hot-tempered and strict with me. She didn't allow me to go near the film studios or have anything to do with people working there. She thought all actors were bastards. But on the sly sometimes I would slip into the studio and watch shooting, fascinated. A lights man fell for me and had me. I became pregnant. My mother arranged an abortion and then kicked me out. I went to stay with a girl friend who was doing bit parts. I hung around at rehearsals and a Bengali director gave me a chance to appear in a dance scene in a stunt film. Then I worked in other films playing small roles, always hoping for a chance to be a star."

"When did you marry?"

"Seven years ago. I never wanted to marry, but in the film world a woman needs protection. Many actresses marry only for this. They exhaust their love on the sets or suddenly panic that they're getting older and must grab a man quickly. I was vain and foolish. Two men kept me and used me up. I had three more abortions. I got addicted to drinking—cheap country liquor. Both my men were strong-willed and so was I. Violent quarrels and smashing of bottles. I became coarse and vulgur myself, would curse and drink like a man. And I was absolutely miserable.

"My second lover gradually became a pimp and would bring other girls into our house. I left him when the Police started raiding. People had misused me and I had misused life. I met a man who was a supplier of birds and animals to film studios. He would reproduce all kinds of animal and bird voices, making us laugh at rehearsals. One day he brought a talking mynah and gave it to me. I was charmed—first by the bird but soon by him. He was 15 years older but I didn't care. I was already 32 and completely run down. It was then that I decided to marry this cheerful, witty man whom I had known for some years but never cared for."

"Do you love your husband?"

"I really didn't know what love was. Always lived a fitful life, digging my nails in to gain a foothold and reach somewhere. Two years ago I developed insomnia and severe headaches. Then a neighbour told me that a Baba had come from Punjab and was known for curing people. I went to a *sangat* at Chembur and heard him speak. It was not his words so much as the

feeling he gave me. I joined the queue afterwards and took the *gian*. My headache stopped. I didn't understand much but I felt good after years and years. The next Sunday my husband came there and also took the *gian*. Now I find in him qualities which I never saw before. I no longer moan over my lost days and years. I do my film work as a job. Only a few contracts for minor roles. I have seen God in Baba and realise that this whole world is like a film set—unreal. We must do our part in it, but not lose ourselves lest we lose sight of God. It took me all these years to find Him in Babaji, and now I must keep Him."

It had been refreshing to listen to her. No inhibitions about what was in her mind and what she had gone through until she met Baba and put all her trust in him.

A woman in a ragged sari was sweeping the floor. A jewelled woman in silk came up, knelt and touched the cracked dusty feet of the sweeperess and went on into the *sangat*. I recognised her as the wife of Kahan Singh, the rich proprietor of Parkway Hotel and owner of a watch company. I chanced to go to their seaside hotel-cum-restaurant for lunch with a film director and found Baba's and Rajmata's photographs displayed on their counter. This aroused my interest. After lunch I met Kahan Singh, who told me,"Twenty years ago I was just a struggling shopkeeper burdened with worries. Sleepless nights ... and endless days of work made me miserable and I reached nowhere. After a few days I received the 'light'. I had more energy ... Babaji had lifted off my mental burden. I continue to swim in this ocean full of sharks and crocodiles, but I am safe with Babaji by my side. Also my social values have changed. I do not believe

in higher and lower status. My waiter, my driver, my cook are my equals because I touch their feet and share morsels of food with them. It's a feeling which I can't describe... beautiful and good. You have to experience it yourself."

Attractive, wealthy and middle-aged, Devi Topan Shahni is the widow of a high officer in the Bombay Food Corporation who had died of a heart attack. Her husband was a Nirankari before their marriage but he never pressed her to take the *gian*. She did so of her own volition several years later. Now she is one of Baba's nominees to dispense the *gian*. "What attracted me was the freedom from external conventions and rituals and the warmth of a real fraternity that joyously brings out the best in every member. Whenever I do something wrong or even have a temptation, I think of Babaji and am at once corrected."

I asked her, "Do you travel a lot as a nominee?"

"Sometimes. In 1970, I was sent to Hong Kong where I conducted a *sangat* in the house of Hira Nand Advani, owner of a tailoring shop, and his wife Sundari. That was the beginning. Now they hold congregations every Saturday."

While Devi was speaking another woman came in with a tray of tea. Devi introduced Chandari as both sister and sister-in-law because the two sisters married husbands who are brothers. And both sisters took the *gian* on the same day.

I asked Devi, "How has being a Nirankari affected you?"

"It has helped me to control my temper. And when my husband died 18 months ago my little daughter deeply in love with her father did not cry. Nor did I. Not a single tear. I knew that his body belonged to

God—everything does. So why to cry? That was a miracle to be able to control my sorrow so much. A miracle born of inner discipline and light... I'm not a philosopher... can't argue out my case... but I can say that I'm content."

"Have you ever experienced any miracle?" I asked.

"I have," answered Chandari. "When years ago I was to receive Shehanshahji (the previous Guru Baba Avtar Singh) in Poona, there was no money in the house. My husband had lost heavily in business and debts had piled up. No money even for food. I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to borrow, but wished for 300 rupees so I could serve the Shehanshahji and all the guests good food. From where could I get it? I stood in the empty kitchen, worriedly looking out of the window... Lo! 300 rupees lying on the window sill! I picked them up wonderingly. Had someone forgotten them there? I went through the house asking. Nobody had. Could I have put them there some weeks ago? Impossible because I had not had so much money for a long time. Could it be that the Shehanshahji had sent it? Or God? Or...what? I went out shopping and prepared a huge, sumptuous dinner for everyone, grateful for the fulfilment of my wish. After the Shehanshahji's visit my husband's business improved and now everything is fine."

Devi added, "Now Babaji is my safety net. He gives me courage to do much more than I would otherwise dare... travelling, speaking publicly, keeping my chin up..."

Govind Phanse, an employee in the Bombay Electric Supply and Transport Company, is a Maharashtrian Brahmin whose community rejected him when he became a Nirankari. His relatives accused him of

being a depraved rascal who had polluted his religion. Govind sighed: "It is hard to fight against fanaticism. They were not valuing me as a human being but only as an abstract member of the Brahmin caste. All their affection fell off when I became a follower of Babaji. But I have found a much more loving world."

He arose and carried out my breakfast plate which as a Brahmin he would never have touched.

When I was sitting on the verandah watching the sunset, a bluish dark, full-breasted woman wearing a much-used thin silk sari came up. She touched my feet and I jumped. She sat down on the floor and I noticed that her black hair almost merged with her very dark nape. She looked about 35. I asked her name and she said, "Josephine," adding "Nine years ago I took the *gian* and the veil was stripped off."

"What veil?" I asked.

"Of my fate."

"How?"

"Babaji gave me the inner secret."

"What secret is that?"

"Sky is the roof, earth the floor and in between is my world."

"That's no secret."

"That's the truth, which nobody ever told me. When I go to church, does Jesus on the Cross speak to me? No. A stone image cannot. But my Babaji tells me everything. First I had doubts, but not now."

"Why do you wear a cross?"

"I am a Catholic and I have always worn it."

"Where does your husband work?"

"In the *dog-yard.*"

"Dog. . . ?"

"Yes. The harbour: Dog-yard. In the ship building..."

"Any children?"

"None."

"Why? Anything wrong with your husband?"

"No. With me. Some mistake inside me... Something wrong with my womb."

"You want children?"

"Which woman wouldn't? I yearn for children. My whole being craves for them... I have a clay body, destined to fall apart... No one knows all of nature's secrets. No doctor. Only God, who may yet give me a son. Babaji says such miracles happen through serving. The same thing Jesus taught, but the Babaji's words reach me because he lives here and now to say them in person."

Rishi Vyas Dev lives in two rooms with his family in the main building of the bhavan. The Mission purchased this building along with its spacious lawns, all set in a compound of two acres in Chembur, now a part of Greater Bombay. The villa was built by an Anglo-Indian couple 20 years ago when Chembur was a rugged, sparsely-inhabited area surrounded by salt fields, low hills and creeks. A sudden death occurred in their family. They saw a ghost stalking at night through the rooms and in a few months another death occurred. They quit the villa and nobody would buy it. Even when film studios and industrial plants and a colony of low-priced houses grew up in the vicinity, nobody would buy this haunted villa. Its market price dropped from a million rupees to half a million and finally the Nirankaris bought it for only three lakh rupees in 1968.

Vyas narrated, "I was away at Delhi, so my wife

and young daughter shifted here into the room which was believed to be haunted and slept there. By keeping the image of Babaji in their hearts and the word 'Nirankar' on their lips, they did not experience any ghost. Slowly this haunted villa became the most popular place for people to gather—for singing, meditating and exchanging views. Perhaps God secured this place for our noble Mission in His service."

Rishi Vyas, at 57, looks like a professor of philosophy and has an exceptionally warm, pleasant personality. Through his efforts the Nirankari fellowship swelled from a handful of 30 members in 1950 to its present 30,000 in Bombay alone. Along with Lal Chand who is in charge of the southern zone of India, including Maharashtra, Andhra, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and a part of Orissa, he tours, conducts *sangats* in formal regalia of white kurta-pyjama and prayer shawl, gives sermons, dispenses the *gian,* and organises new branches and bhávans. Clean-shaven, spectacled and still black-haired, he is a favourite nominee of Baba. Local devotees call him 'Pitaji' and honour his untiringly patient and hospitable wife as 'Mataji'.

I stayed with him for seven days. What struck me most was his purity and selflessness. He would get up at any time of the night if someone knocked at his door or telephoned for help. He combines the functions of a country doctor, a social worker and a spiritual adviser. His wife looks after the unending hordes of guests and visitors streaming into the bhavan, feeding, serving and helping them cheerfully at all hours.

Vyas was born into a wealthy Hindu family. His father died when he was four, and his intensely religious mother looked after him. By reading to him from the

Hindu scriptures that everything of this world is an illusion she put him on the search for what is real. Vyas said, "Everything appeared illusory to me. Sitting in my college classroom, the other boys seemed unreal to me and the blackboard, the teacher and myself also. What was real then? I was haunted by this question. For years I visited shrines and talked with sadhus... In my childhood I had sat crosslegged and stared at a black dot on a white wall as a yogic exercise in order to develop concentration of mind. With practice I learned to stare at it for an hour without blinking. I felt the little black dot expanding and burning like a ball of fire and this gave me a sense of hypnotic power... But I stopped because it frightened me... What was my reality? I was constantly questioning. I would beat my chest in frustration and weep... Finally in 1940 the Nirankari founder, Baba Boota Singh, gave me the *gian*. That was the turning point in my life."

So saying, Vyas looked at me kindly and said, "Our ancient scriptures are spiritual prescriptions. Simply worshipping these does not heal. One must have a doctor, a knower of God, to administer the spiritual medicine. Our Babaji does that for us."

4

Chillies and Honey

After two weeks in Bombay I returned to Delhi. I had sent a cable to the Nirankari bhavan so that they would keep a room for me. I knew somebody would be at the station to meet me but it was a blind date. As the Frontier Mail slowed down by the platform, I saw a blur of heads and then a tall man with a white turban and white prayer shawl around his neck. I recognised the Nirankari regalia. When I got down I came up to him and he excitedly shook my hand and introduced himself as G.S. Bhatia. On the way to the bhavan by car he gave me a lot of general information about the organization and some very interesting details about himself. When I arrived at the bhavan I was conducted to my room on the top floor. It had two string beds covered with fresh white sheets, a table with two chairs and a clay water jug sitting in a corner, and an attached bathroom. I had dinner in my room and slept soundly.

The Delhi bhavan is a giant complex. It houses the office, the community kitchen with dining hall; little apartments for some permanent functionaries; a photographic studio, Baba's air conditioned rooms

where he lives with his family; a publishing house; a courtyard large enough to accommodate 5,000; spacious garages, quarters for many who work for the Mission; a three-storey wing of guest rooms; storerooms and huge godowns for wheat.

It was a Sunday morning and people had already started collecting in the courtyard for the 9 a.m. *sangat*. I went out onto my balcony and watched four men hoist a huge tarpaulin section by section as sailors used to raise the sails of their three-masted schooners. This was to shade the congregation from the scorching sun, with sides open for air to flow through. I wandered back in, wanting some tea. Suddenly Bhatia came to offer me a choice of breakfast. Soon he brought to my room a tray with tea and an omlette made from farm-fresh eggs.

As he set it down, I invited him to continue his story. He said, "As I told you, I was a very arrogant school inspector. When I became a Nirankari in 1955 my wife was very angry . . . in fact, started hating me. I plunged myself into service of the Mission. All my arrogance was gone. I would even bow to my former students. This new humility incited my wife and sons to scorn and insult me. Once I told them, 'I earn for you, bring food into the house, and make possible your education. I'm the sole breadwinner. Even just out of gratitude you should not reject me.' That softened them a bit. Over the years I have won them over—not to becoming Nirankaris but at least to accepting me as one. I would not have been able to go on living with them if I had not been able to live with myself. One of the Mission rules is that a Nirankari should not hate under any circumstances, but return all hate with love." Bhatia's face, though peaceful, is etched

with the lines of this long struggle and his eyes still bear the shadow of it.

He continued, "Some join the Mission for worldly gain, knowing their brethren will help them with loans or in finding jobs. They grab this help, exploit it to the fullest and then quit. But such examples are really very few. One can never tell who will do that and we always trust."

Bhatia had to go back down to the *sangat* for the preliminaries. It was hot and oppressive in my room, though still early in the morning. I wandered out to the adjoining terrace for a breath of fresh air. A whitish haze hung over everything, the emanation of a trembling gaseous heat. The tall steel spikes of far off television relays pierced the haze. Clumps of dry trees dotted the brown earth and River Jamuna, shrunken to a small stream, was not visible between its dry, sandy banks. No relief there, so I returned to my room. In the courtyard below, the clanging of cymbals and throbbing of drums over the loudspeaker had begun. Now a high-pitched raucous female voice arose, chanting verses of Guru Nanak and then I heard Baba's voice expounding on these verses. I suddenly realized I was late for the *sangat* so hurried down the two flights of steps and saw the courtyard filled with gay people. The high-pitched chanting began again and I saw it was Secretary Ram Saran in his limp turban, swaying his head, chanting from a little notebook. I took my seat near the front.

The sun was beating through the canopy, casting hot shadows. Men were taking turns fanning Baba and Rajmata sitting on a little throne and blessing people.

A young boy and girl betrothed that very day moved

up in the queue to Baba and offered him a brass jug of milk which Baba sipped and then returned. The boy took a sip of the now sanctified milk and offered it to the girl. As she drank, the betrothal was confirmed in the presence of Baba and the *sangat*.

After a little while three young girls in yellow, turquoise and wine-coloured silk, silver anklets, shalwar-kameez and silk chunnis over their heads, came to the microphone and sang in a chorus praising the Guru. The long line of devotees on its way to Baba passed them and put money at Baba's feet. By the time the girls finished their song there was a small mound of currency notes. I wondered who they were and asked an old man dozing next to me. He blinked and told me that they were Baba's daughters. Were they also considered divine?

After the *sangat* I met two of the daughters with their tall beautiful friend Harsh Lata, a Hindu married to a Sikh Baldev Singh Barha, who had recently returned from East Africa and settled in Delhi, in the business of manufacturing air compressors. The three came to the office room on the ground floor, nudging and giggling. I singled out the girl in yellow, who had collected the money in her chunni after the song was finished and asked her, "How does it feel to be the daughter of a prophet?"

She hung her head bashfully and would not reply, while her two companions burst into laughter. I had them go out for a few minutes so that she would feel freer to talk. Then I asked her about herself. She was Man Mohan Kaur, 16 year old, fond of hockey, running and singing. "How did you feel when people poured currency notes at your feet?"

"I felt that this was not for me, but for my Guru.

Many of our singers are offered money in this way. Then we all offer it to the Guru, who may accept it or not. Sometimes he senses the need of a singer and asks him to keep it."

"How does it feel to be the daughter of a prophet?" I asked again.

"I have a double relation with him. He is both my father and my Guru. When I was a kid he was more a father to me; but now I think of him more as my Guru."

"Could you become a Guru?"

"I've never thought of it. None of us thinks of becoming a Guru, neither my three sisters nor my brother. People accord us extra respect as children of the Guru, but this only makes us feel more humble."

Besides attending several *sangats* and occasional small get-togethers with Baba, I met many interesting Nirankaris including some key people of the Mission.

I recognised the slim, spectacled Professor Joginder Singh Puri. Twenty-three years ago he had been an ill-tempered accountant in a publishing house which I had sued for not paying my royalties. J.S. Puri sat in the little shop clutching his turbaned head because he suffered from insomnia and migraines. Suddenly seeing him in this Nirankari colony, I was intrigued. He shook my hand and settled down with me in my room saying, "I have come to look after you." I asked, "What else are you doing here?"

He smiled, " I am a humble slave here. A missionary." As I knew him earlier he had been a political rebel who fought in the Freedom Struggle and served six jail terms under the British. How had he landed up here?

He told me, "You remember my headaches? I can't describe their agony. I would be talking to somebody and suddenly my head would burst. . . somebody sledge-hammering my brain. Unbearable. I would throw off my turban, clutch my head and fall on the floor writhing. In 1951 I was admitted to Irwin Hospital. After three months they declared me incurable. One morning the doctors gathered around my bed because I had been tossing and pulling my hair all night. I saw them hovering around me like death messengers and shouted, 'Get out, you vultures! I don't want to stay here any longer.' I signed the papers and left. I wanted to die amidst my children."

He paused, "By temperament I was surly and harsh. Some venom in me. When someone told me about Baba Avtar Singh, the Nirankari Guru at that time, my rational mind dismissed him as a fraud. My mouth was filled with bitterness. What a miserable, backward, superstitious country!

"A friend advised me to leave for some hill station immediately to find relief for my burning head. I took my wife and mother with me in a taxi and left for Mussoorie. As we reached Dehra Dun, my head was calmed. In the hospital my neck had become stiff as if in a plaster cast. Now it became flexible again. That night I slept well. The following day we walked 13 miles up the foaming Ganges. The midday sun was hot and I felt thirsty. So we stopped at a hut where a sadhu with matted locks took a bowl of water from a large clay jar. I cupped my hands and drank this delicious water. He asked me, 'Enjoying?' I retorted, 'None of your business!'

" 'Holidaying?'

" 'Just because you are holidaying, you think I am?

A cat always dreams of fish.'

" 'Do you pray?'

" 'A quick mumble sometimes, like cutting grass with a blunt scythe.'

"I hate pleasantries. There's something sickening about such conversations. A waste of breath. So I stalked off. My behaviour hurt my mother. She said, 'Son, why are you so harsh? These sadhus are gentle souls. They always have good wishes...some herbs and blessings to heal.' I felt a bit ashamed. So I retraced my steps to the sadhu's hut. He beamed, 'Returned so soon, my son?'

" 'I'm sorry.' So saying, I went away with the same pride and arrogance.

"That afternoon we went on up to Mussoorie. We settled in a small hotel and went out into the bazaar. There I saw a woman walking towards me. She shrieked joyfully, 'Professor Sahib, how are you here?'

"She was an old student of mine in a private school in the 40's. She had married a Nirankari much against my advice. I hated that fellow so much for his hocus-pocus religion that I shunned her. Now when we met I was delighted. She asked where we were staying, immediately went there and forcibly removed our baggage to her house. There we lived for a month being fed and served by her. She held small congregations of Nirankaris in her house which I disliked so much that I escaped for long walks. When the month was up I prepared to leave. She asked me to stay just one day more because the Nirankari Shehanshah (Emperor) Baba Avtar Singh was coming to Mussoorie next morning and to her house to bless her. I agreed to stay, so as not to hurt her.

"That night I had a splitting headache. A stream-roller was crushing my head and I was gasping. In between, visions flitted through my heated brain ... white car with a license plate number DLB3670 and clear faces of five people riding in it. A man with a hooked nose opened the left door of the car. A tall, majestic man with flowing white beard emerged. He blessed a wrinkled old woman wearing a muddy green shawl. Her wrinkles expanded like fissured earth ... I woke up with a shriek. Although it was cold, I was drenched with perspiration. Everyone gathered around me and I told them of my vision. The car's license number seemed branded on my forehead ... In the morning everybody went out to receive Shehanshah in the town square. I stayed behind and sneaked out to the city library and stood on its balcony overlooking the square. A white car drove up, to my horror with the same license number. The same five faces and the same left door opening and the same white-bearded man getting out and the same green-shawled old woman receiving his blessing. Everything exactly as in my vision! My headache flared up again. I returned to the house and lay down.

"In the afternoon Shehanshah came. He sat on a white cushioned divan, holding his white curved stick in his right hand and half-resting on it. He spoke to the congregation and I listened from a safe distance in a corner of the room. When the congregation dispersed, my hostess brought me before him.

" 'What do you do?' he asked.

" 'I serve my country. I can even die for my country.'

" 'You do not know your country at all;' he declared. 'You are an ailing soul.' He placed his hands on my shoulders and looked into my eyes.

"A current passed through my body. A healing sensation. Then he put his hands on my cheeks and pressed them, declaring softly, 'Your real self and your disease cannot go together. You are ignorant of your real self. So conscious of your physical form but blind to spiritual reality.'

"That evening he gave me the *gian,* the knowledge of God which must not be disclosed to others. I started crying and sobbed for half an hour, while he patted my head. I begged, 'Pardon me, Shehanshahji, pardon me!' All my philosophy, knowledge, opinions, calculations and arrogance were dissolved. I felt chastened. From that moment I never suffered another headache or any other disease. My faith in Shehanshahji and now in Babaji does not depend on that medical healing, but on the spiritual peace...

"Now I work 18 hours a day reading, writing, publishing, proof-reading, public speaking—all for the Mission. I sleep only six hours and still have energy. Soon I shall be going abroad to propogate the Mission."

A young close-shaven, bronze-faced sadhu in tucked-up saffron dhoti was serving food in the community kitchen. His naked torso and face were perspiring. His high cheekbones, flaring nostrils and thick lips gave him a primitive look. Then he brought my lunch on a brass plate up to my room. I was impressed by his quiet dignity and muscular strength. When he came to remove my utensils I fell into conversation with him. I learned that he was born into a poor family in Badayun, a historical town in U.P., famous for milk sweets. His father had two wives (before this became illegal). After he died Anand Dev's stepbrother drank and gambled and sold the small house. Thus at the

age of seven, Anand Dev was homeless and his mother had to take up a sweeperess's job in a wealthy home. He wandered, became a devotee at a Shiva shrine and took a vow to remain celibate.

"I practised yoga, read scriptures and meditated for days, keeping complete control of my mind," said Anand Dev,"All the same a doubt crept into me as to the purpose of my existence. Corruption in temples and rivalry between sadhus of different sects upset me. I was led to Babaji by a Nirankari and he invited me to serve here in the bhavan. I carry huge cauldrons of steaming food, sweep the floor, move heavy furniture and fix poles in the ground for *sangat* canopies. My muscles (flexing his powerful arm) feel happy with all this work."

"Are you still a celibate?"I asked.

"Yes."

"Even in dreams you never had a woman?"

"No."

"How is that?"

"I keep myself busy and my mind never wanders."

"But why do you want to remain celibate?"

"That has always been my way of life. I was also a Buddhist monk for a few years. Carnal desires are a trap. I'm happy as I am. I have no desire to marry."

I was busy meeting people and attending some *sangats* around Delhi with Baba, so I didn't see the young sadhu again for a week.

One evening he was scrubbing the floor with a long broomstick. He wore a long, loose white shirt and a white dhoti. Baba's driver told me with a grin, "You know, Sir, he got married two days ago! Now he has a charming companion."

Bursting with curiosity, I invited him to come to my room during a free moment. He entered and sat

"A current passed through my body. A healing sensation. Then he put his hands on my cheeks and pressed them, declaring softly, 'Your real self and your disease cannot go together. You are ignorant of your real self. So conscious of your physical form but blind to spiritual reality.'

"That evening he gave me the *gian,* the knowledge of God which must not be disclosed to others. I started crying and sobbed for half an hour, while he patted my head. I begged, 'Pardon me, Shehanshahji, pardon me!' All my philosophy, knowledge, opinions, calculations and arrogance were dissolved. I felt chastened. From that moment I never suffered another headache or any other disease. My faith in Shehanshahji and now in Babaji does not depend on that medical healing, but on the spiritual peace...

"Now I work 18 hours a day reading, writing, publishing, proof-reading, public speaking—all for the Mission. I sleep only six hours and still have energy. Soon I shall be going abroad to propogate the Mission."

A young close-shaven, bronze-faced sadhu in tucked-up saffron dhoti was serving food in the community kitchen. His naked torso and face were perspiring. His high cheekbones, flaring nostrils and thick lips gave him a primitive look. Then he brought my lunch on a brass plate up to my room. I was impressed by his quiet dignity and muscular strength. When he came to remove my utensils I fell into conversation with him. I learned that he was born into a poor family in Badayun, a historical town in U.P., famous for milk sweets. His father had two wives (before this became illegal). After he died Anand Dev's stepbrother drank and gambled and sold the small house. Thus at the

age of seven, Anand Dev was homeless and his mother had to take up a sweeperess's job in a wealthy home. He wandered, became a devotee at a Shiva shrine and took a vow to remain celibate.

"I practised yoga, read scriptures and meditated for days, keeping complete control of my mind," said Anand Dev, "All the same a doubt crept into me as to the purpose of my existence. Corruption in temples and rivalry between sadhus of different sects upset me. I was led to Babaji by a Nirankari and he invited me to serve here in the bhavan. I carry huge cauldrons of steaming food, sweep the floor, move heavy furniture and fix poles in the ground for *sangat* canopies. My muscles (flexing his powerful arm) feel happy with all this work."

"Are you still a celibate?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Even in dreams you never had a woman?"

"No."

"How is that?"

"I keep myself busy and my mind never wanders."

"But why do you want to remain celibate?"

"That has always been my way of life. I was also a Buddhist monk for a few years. Carnal desires are a trap. I'm happy as I am. I have no desire to marry."

I was busy meeting people and attending some *sangats* around Delhi with Baba, so I didn't see the young sadhu again for a week.

One evening he was scrubbing the floor with a long broomstick. He wore a long, loose white shirt and a white dhoti. Baba's driver told me with a grin, "You know, Sir, he got married two days ago! Now he has a charming companion."

Bursting with curiosity, I invited him to come to my room during a free moment. He entered and sat

"A current passed through my body. A healing sensation. Then he put his hands on my cheeks and pressed them, declaring softly, 'Your real self and your disease cannot go together. You are ignorant of your real self. So conscious of your physical form but blind to spiritual reality.'

"That evening he gave me the *gian,* the knowledge of God which must not be disclosed to others. I started crying and sobbed for half an hour, while he patted my head. I begged, 'Pardon me, Shehanshahji, pardon me!' All my philosophy, knowledge, opinions, calculations and arrogance were dissolved. I felt chastened. From that moment I never suffered another headache or any other disease. My faith in Shehanshahji and now in Babaji does not depend on that medical healing, but on the spiritual peace...

"Now I work 18 hours a day reading, writing, publishing, proof-reading, public speaking—all for the Mission. I sleep only six hours and still have energy. Soon I shall be going abroad to propogate the Mission."

A young close-shaven, bronze-faced sadhu in tucked-up saffron dhoti was serving food in the community kitchen. His naked torso and face were perspiring. His high cheekbones, flaring nostrils and thick lips gave him a primitive look. Then he brought my lunch on a brass plate up to my room. I was impressed by his quiet dignity and muscular strength. When he came to remove my utensils I fell into conversation with him. I learned that he was born into a poor family in Badayun, a historical town in U.P., famous for milk sweets. His father had two wives (before this became illegal). After he died Anand Dev's stepbrother drank and gambled and sold the small house. Thus at the

age of seven, Anand Dev was homeless and his mother had to take up a sweeperess's job in a wealthy home. He wandered, became a devotee at a Shiva shrine and took a vow to remain celibate.

"I practised yoga, read scriptures and meditated for days, keeping complete control of my mind," said Anand Dev,"All the same a doubt crept into me as to the purpose of my existence. Corruption in temples and rivalry between sadhus of different sects upset me. I was led to Babaji by a Nirankari and he invited me to serve here in the bhavan. I carry huge cauldrons of steaming food, sweep the floor, move heavy furniture and fix poles in the ground for *sangat* canopies. My muscles (flexing his powerful arm) feel happy with all this work."

"Are you still a celibate?"I asked.

"Yes."

"Even in dreams you never had a woman?"

"No."

"How is that?"

"I keep myself busy and my mind never wanders."

"But why do you want to remain celibate?"

"That has always been my way of life. I was also a Buddhist monk for a few years. Carnal desires are a trap. I'm happy as I am. I have no desire to marry."

I was busy meeting people and attending some *sangats* around Delhi with Baba, so I didn't see the young sadhu again for a week.

One evening he was scrubbing the floor with a long broomstick. He wore a long, loose white shirt and a white dhoti. Baba's driver told me with a grin, "You know, Sir, he got married two days ago! Now he has a charming companion."

Bursting with curiosity, I invited him to come to my room during a free moment. He entered and sat

on the edge of a chair. "Congratulations!" I exclaimed. "I hear you have a wife now."

He smiled shyly, "Yes, Sir."

"How do you feel?"

"Very happy."

"What tempted you to suddenly marry?"

"Babaji's order."

"*Order?*"

"Yes, his word is always an order. One cannot be a true Nirankari if one shuns the responsibilities of this world."

I had to see a friend 10 miles away in Connaught Place and there was no conveyance available. A slim, noble-faced sikh in his 50's offered to take me in his Fiat. He patiently waited while I got ready and shuffled my papers together. Throughout the drive I sensed his extreme caution and precision, yet relaxation. He asked all about me, my comfort and my activities, and listened to me with interest as I rattled on about my ideas on theatre and the expanding television. When we reached Connaught Place I thanked him very much and asked his name. He was Babu Mahadev Singh, a dealer in auto spare parts. We made a date to meet in my room the following day at 8 a.m.

When I returned to the bhavan that evening, Bhatia happily remarked, "I'm glad you met our joint Secretary Babuji. He is the most popular of our seven Stars (executive board) and is a great spiritual force."

The following morning at precisely 8 a.m. 'Babuji' knocked at my door. He came in looking impeccably fresh with his beard neatly pinned under his chin. I was still in my crumpled nightwear and unshaven, for which I apologized. He replied, "I understand. I can come again after an hour. And meanwhile I

shall finish a few jobs." He left, taking away my guilt and making me feel as if I had done him a favour.

He returned punctually at nine. I was curious to know how this gentle, controlled personality had been drawn into the Nirankari fold. He told me, "In 1938 I was going through a shopping centre with my mother-in-law when we met a tall, old man dressed in white with a jet-black beard. My mother-in-law bent and touched his feet and he laid his hand on her head in blessing. She told me it was Baba Boota Singh. I disliked him and the whole scene because I disapproved of human beings parading as divine messengers. As a Sikh it was against my ethics to allow anyone to fall at my feet. Then this Baba Boota Singh came to stay with us that very day. I ordered my bed moved far away so I wouldn't have to hear his voice."

I looked at the Babuji's gentle face and wondered at this harshness. Also I was thinking that his steadfast determination of manner could not have allowed an easy conversation—nothing guided by impulse or any sense of guilt.

Babuji continued, "I met Baba Boota Singh again in my village where he came with his disciple Avtar Singh who always accompanied him. My father took the *gian* from him and my whole family was converted. But I kept aloof. To me it all seemed a hoax. One day I happened to go to the village gurdwara, where I found Baba Boota Singh lecturing to the Sikh congregation."

I asked, "How could he be allowed in the gurdwara?"

Babuji replied, "In gurdwaras any Sikh can come and address the congregation. Baba Boota Singh had a good voice—loud and resonant—and he sang Guru Nanak's *baani* with a harmonium to spellbound

audiences. Afterwards he called me inside and asked me to sit near him and listen to what he was going to say. A small group gathered around. He talked about God's light, the Universal Knowledge, the *gian*. Then he looked at me and spoke one sentence which made me realise God in a few seconds."

"What was that sentence?" I eagerly asked.

"That I cannot tell you. It's too pure and sacred. You have to be in a fit frame of mind ... like a patient you have to cooperate. The doctor can put medicine into your mouth but he cannot make you swallow it if you're bent on spitting it out. As I listened to Baba Boota Singh an almost chemical change took place inside my body: a surging joy, a release. I felt as if I had shed a heavy weight. I bowed and laid my forehead on his feet."

After a pause he went on, "I took service in Avtar Singh's bakery and began attending the weekly *sangats*. When Baba Boota Singh breathed his last and merged with the Universal Spirit, after appointing Avtar Singh as his successor, I became his disciple and remained by his side for the next quarter of a century. In the early years there was strong opposition in Rawalpindi against Baba Avtar Singh whom we called 'Shehanshahji' and he was banned from the gurdwaras. He didn't care and continued propagating the Mission at his own services. Sometimes blue-turbaned gurdwara priests came to listen. We thought they were impressed by our teachings. But we soon learned that they were planted there to find out the inner working of the Mission. After a week they suddenly invaded in hundreds, surrounded our *pandal* and threatened our Baba that he must stop his 'barking' or his head would be chopped off in one stroke by their gleam-

ing swords. Finally they withdrew, muttering foul curses. And the Shehanshahji firmly continued his sermon."

Babu Mahadev reflected: "For years it was very difficult. But after the Partition when we shifted to Delhi, the Mission spread rapidly. Shehanshahji always kept me by his side. Day and night I lived with him until he breathed his last with his head in my lap. It was a great spiritual companionship. He was both my friend and Guru and I find his spirit shining forth in Baba Gurbachan Singh who was for years my junior, like a nephew. When Shehanshahji himself became his disciple, I gladly followed."

I was introduced to the short, muscular 'Commander-in-Chief' (Mukhya Shikshak) of the Nirankari Seva Dal (devotee-army of volunteers) spread all over India. His name was Partap Singh and he had been a bandit! Born 52 years ago into a Hindu Arya Samajist family, he became a Sikh at an early age and went about in search of God as a Nihang (soldier-priest). He then joined another sect and finally came to be a member of a fanatic body which champions the cause of a Hindu India. Burning with revolutionary zeal, he planned to blow up the Karachi Secretariat in 1947.

He told me, "Sir, the bomb exploded ahead of schedule and one of our men died on the spot. The Pakistan Police arrested all the plotters but I escaped in the guise of a Muslim and reached Bombay. There I met my friends who planned to raise money and did so by robbing a railway train. We all were arrested. You see, I was not a professional bandit—just a simple man with passion to serve my country. I had stolen this money only to help my comrades in Pakistan to return to India. I was thrown in jail. There I prayed to God for peace, but always lived in agitation. When

I got out after a few years I returned to Ahmedabad and set up a tiny business as a mechanic and repairman.

"It so happened that Shehanshah Avtar Singh came to Ahmedabad to preach his message. People were against him and nobody would give him even a loud-speaker. A man came to my shop to borrow one, which I gave. That night I met the Shehanshah at a dinner. One of his Sindhi devotees told me that I could have the vision of God if the Shehanshah blessed me.

"The next morning I again met this tall and very regal personage with flowing beard and hypnotic eyes—the most striking thing about him. Strong and compelling. He took a vow of secrecy from me and revealed the *gian*. I became his disciple. In those days people were against him. That was in 1952."

The ex-bandit laughed proudly showing his strong gleaming white teeth in a rough face with short spiky black beard.

He continued,"When I went to my village where many old friends and relatives live, they wondered to see me dressed all in white with a holy shawl because they knew me only as a scoundrel. An old friend asked me, 'How are you wearing the dress of a sant?' I replied, 'I was a box of powdered chillies. Anyone who came near me began to choke on my stinging bitterness. Now my Master has replaced the chillies with honey.' " He philosophized, "Sir, it is said that Shiva had a necklace of snakes. That is only an allegory. These snakes are us. I was a snake. Many scoundrels like me, rejected by the society, are venomous. But with the blessing of the Guru one can be tamed as I was."

5

The Line of Succession

THE NIRANKARI MOVEMENT was founded by a tattoo master—Boota Singh (1873–1943). A tall, muscular, unconventional Sikh, he regularly visited the British cantonments in Naushehra, Landikotal and Peshawar every weekend when the soldiers got their pay. He tattooed the arms and torsos of the tommies with designs of lions, cobras, peacocks and women. Yet basically he was a religious man and did this tattooing only in his spare time. The other four days he reserved for his spiritual work. He had a marvellous singing voice and would do *kirtans,* chanting the *baani* of the Sikh gurus. In 1929 he was proclaimed the new Nirankari guru by Kahn Singh, who carried him on his shoulders through the streets of Rawalpindi joyfully shouting his discovery. Thus Boota Singh became the founder of the Sant Nirankaris who embrace all faiths (in opposition to the traditional Sikh Nirankaris who claim to be the purest Sikhs).

Boota Singh had for long been inwardly opposed to the rigid conventions and rituals of his religion. He was against all taboos, castes, creeds and divisions of humanity based on external habits and appearances.

His soul revolted against a religion which dictates what to eat, drink and wear. He used to drink almost every day but would not ask his pupils to join him unless they wished. To demonstrate his spiritual convictions he would sometimes drink openly and go about preaching his mission. In the early '30s he had hardly a dozen followers. There was strong opposition to his unconventional ways and he was threatened, even beaten, by diehard Sikhs. This only served to further popularize him and he gained more followers.

He lived in a two-room house in Peshawar Cantonment. He used to get up very early and start his daily *sangat* at 4:00 a.m. with his disciples sitting around him. Among these were Avtar Singh, Labh Singh, Gopal Singh Premi, and Dr. Des Raj. They sat on the floor while Boota Singh sat crosslegged at the same level on a small mat with a little oil lamp burning by his side. He would chant the *baani* from the *Guru Granth Sahib* and expound upon this with comments. These early morning sessions were in the tradition of the Hindus and Sikhs, who believe in the special godliness of '*Amrit Vela*', the Hour of Nectar, the totally quiet time before dawn.

Boota Singh was called 'Bhai Sahib' (dear brother) by many of his disciples. He was a fast walker and impulsive in his programme, but very punctual and regular about his early morning *sangats*. His speech was full of aphorisms and he was fond of impromptu allegories. Striding through the bazaar he would suddenly stop by a group of habitual chess players and settle down with them to watch, making philosophical comments. Wherever he found a small crowd he would crash in and talk to them fearlessly about his convictions. Once he sat in an open-air shop talking

loudly and feverishly. People thought he was drunk. Some young men came and started insulting him but he didn't care. One of his disciples lost his temper over these unruly boys but Boota Singh sat relaxed and said, "Why are you bothered? Be it praise or condemnation, honour or disgrace—I don't care. Anyone who loses his temper is not my pupil. Whatever is happening is happening for the best."

Once he stood on a balcony with young Dr. Des Raj and asked him, "What is this crowd flowing below us?" Des Raj replied, "People." Boota Singh snapped, "Fool! Those are dead bodies. Carcasses. Not living souls." He would shock people out of their smugness by such statements. Sometimes he would tell an old man, "Become a little boy, a child, a baby. Then you will have no worries or fears and you will see God."

His most ardent devotee was Avtar Singh, who ran a bakery in Peshawar and then shifted his business to Rawalpindi to be closer to his Guru. Boota Singh would stride into the bakery, push Avtar Singh aside and plunder his cash box of all earnings. Sometimes he would appear suddenly and demand, "How much money do you have? Give it to me! Hurry! Take it out!" and Avtar Singh would empty his pockets. His devotion was total and remained so in spite of the curses and spurning of his Guru. Boota Singh would go up to any shopkeeper-friend, demand five rupees and walk out with the money. People grumbled that he was too money-minded and spendthrift. One day Avtar Singh humbly said to him, "Babaji, don't ask other people for petty sums. Take whatever I have. It's all yours."

Boota Singh flared up, "What nonsense! Do you want to inherit all my spiritual empire, greedy louse?

You don't want anything to go to others?" That subdued Avtar Singh, who realized that his Guru was perhaps testing his followers.

Every summer Boota Singh would go to Murree Hill Station near Rawalpindi. During his 70th year, in 1943, he asked his favourite disciple Avtar Singh, who was always with him, to send telegrams to other followers to assemble in Murree because his time had come. By noon of the appointed day about thirty assembled around his bed, where he lay rather weakly yet spoke with strength. He ordered Avtar Singh, "Feed them well." They all ate from one huge bowl and then started chanting the *baani*. At 2:00 p.m. they filed past their Guru, touching his feet and offering money. As he received each offering he rubbed it against his chest and then laid it by his side. His aged mother, sitting nearby, asked, "Even now so much love for money, dear son?" Boota Singh replied, "You don't understand, mother. I'm accepting the love-offerings of my children." His wife began crying and Boota Singh rebuked her, "Weep as much as you wish—now while I'm living. But if you weep when I'm gone I will never pardon you. I am the Eternal Spirit, which never dies."

Then he ordered two of his disciples to go and bring six yards of new white cotton stitched down the centre. But he would not let Avtar Singh leave his side. He lay on the charpoy and the cloth was brought. The disciples were a bit puzzled because such an item is traditionally a shroud. His pulse was normal, as confirmed by Dr. Des Raj and one other disciple, Prem Kaur of Mussoorie. Then he sat up against a bolster with his legs hanging down and said, "Well, my time has come to leave you. Tell me, shall I exit

from the door or from that ventilator hole?" Then he murmured, "You are the Nirankar . . . You are the Nirankar. . . " and raised his arms up and up as all his followers chanted with him. Suddenly his head sank to one side and he passed away in this posture.

In *sangats* he would often say, "I'm putting a garland of flowers around your necks. But around Avtar Singh's I'm putting a garland of razor blades." By this he meant he was giving all responsibility to him. Sometimes he would give him his coat, hand him his stick and say to the congregation, "After me Avtar Singh will be your Guru. My speech is sharp, but I'm giving you a leader who will speak honey-sweet words. Yet it will be I—Boota Singh—who will be speaking through him to you." Thus at his death everyone accepted Avtar Singh as their new Guru.

Baba Avtar Singh (1899–1969), popularly known by his followers as 'Shehanshahji', took upon himself the burden of leading the Mission in 1943. Years before he had been a staunch Akali Sikh who served three years in British jail as a freedom fighter. As the head of the Nirankaris, he met strong opposition from the Sikh community, which felt he was misleading the masses. This drove Shehanshah to propagate the new mission with fiery spiritual zeal. He was very perceptive and wisely selected a team of ardent devotees to assist him in spreading the movement. Most of the senior members of today's Mission, including the present Seven Stars, were disciples of Shehanshah or his colleagues during Boota Singh's Babaship.

After the Partition Shehanshah and his followers shifted to Delhi and set up headquarters in two rooms in a dingy little lane in the Paharganj area for some

years. The city was seething with distraught, uprooted people. Shehanshah's healing personality and magnetic aura drew followers from all sections of life. He set up the Sant Nirankari Mandal as a registered body in Delhi in 1948 with an executive body of Seven Stars and gave the movement a constitution and organizational shape. He sent his disciple Rishi Vyas Dev to Bombay as a pioneer to spread the Mission further. In Patiala he appointed Amar Singh as head of the northern zone, and branches and bhavans sprang up all over the Punjab and Himachal Pradesh. Professor J.S. Puri, Urdu poet Saqi, secretary K.R. Chadha, teacher-writer J.R.D. Arya, Pratap Singh, Ram Rattan Kapila and Gurbakhsh Singh Raj Kavi of Amritsar were all groomed under Baba Avtar Singh's majestic spiritualism.

Like Boota Singh, Avtar Singh had little formal education. As he himself claims in the Foreward he wrote in 1957 to his own *baani* composed in Punjabi in the '50s, he had only once before composed a poem, in reply to that of a friend. For his eloquent compendium of odes to the Formless God called *Avtar Baani* he lays all credit at the feet of his "True Master, Reverend Shri Satguru Baba Boota Singhji Maharaj". Because of its plebian style that all followers can understand and that it is written by their Mission's greatest architect, it has become the Nirankari scripture.

In the '50s the Nirankari Mission purchased almost barren land by the side of the River Jamuna in Delhi at a low price and shifted there. Now it is a large, flourishing colony with a huge three-storey bhavan surrounded by hundreds of dwellings plus a school, dispensary and shopping area.

In 1958 Baba Avtar Singh fell seriously ill. His

senior devotees, including Saqi who was always by his side even at night, gathered around anxiously but dared not ask Shehanshah who would take his place. Saqi ventured, when everyone else had gone, "Shehanshahji, you have vastly expanded our fraternity. So much beauty and power and sweep. Who will lead the Mission when you are gone?"

Shehanshah knitted his brows and kept a thoughtful silence.

In December 1962 Shehanshah went on an Indian tour and, on an impulse, left word behind that his son Gurbachan Singh would conduct the *sangats* and be called 'Baba' from then onwards. It left some people a bit baffled. But when on his way back to Delhi, Shehanshah met Gurbachan Singh at Allahabad railway station and touched his feet in the presence of his senior colleagues and hundreds of other people, it cleared the mist. Gurbachan Singh was the new 'Baba'. Thus the son became the Guru and the father became the disciple.

In the 1963 *samagam* a coronation ceremony was held and Shehanshah placed a gold crown on young Gurbachan's turban.

For the next six years Avtar Singh was always by his son's side at the *sangats* and on tours in India. In 1968 he went abroad as a nominee-apostle and did much to strengthen and encourage the movement in England where many of his old disciples had settled.

After his return his health began to fail. At the age of 70 he breathed his last in 1969 in the Delhi bhavan amidst his large family and devotees. Accompanied by chanting and singing his body was taken to the electric crematorium by the side of River Jamuna. No rituals, rites nor tears.

6

The Seven Stars

THE NIRANKARI MISSION is run by the Seven Stars, i.e. the nominees of Baba, who so far have been for life, changing only in the case of death. I met them all on various occasions.

President Labh Singh is a tall, ramrod-straight man in his 70's, with small, penetrating eyes and a majestic white beard. A little hard of hearing, he speaks in a ringing voice. He is the oldest of the Stars and was among the first to take the *gian* from Baba Boota Singh. A quick wit and a polemicist in Punjabi on spiritual matters, he has been president throughout. A professor once asked him, "I understand the meaning of Nirankar. But how to believe it?" Labh Singh shot back, "Did you see your father riding your mother to beget you?" The professor was demolished. Also he is so humble and full of zeal to serve that at the annual *samagam* in 1954 he sat in the open-air community kitchen in shorts and bare topknot frying puris in a huge iron pan sizzling with smoking ghee. His wit and humility have been hallmarks of his long career as the founder-president.

By the side of Baba Avtar Singh he endured threats

and fierce opposition from the Sikh community. He handled these difficult, even dangerous situations with tolerance and wisdom. Father of five sons and three daughters and grandfather to a dozen more children, he travels and crusades for the Mission with his early youthful zeal.

Vice-president Dr. Des Raj was born into a staunch Hindu family. His mother died when he was six months old and his father never remarried. He raised his two sons in a strict religious atmosphere. As a little boy Des Raj would sit with his father chanting hymns and began studying the *Bhagavad-Gita* in Urdu when he was 10 years old. He went to the temple daily and worked himself up into a religious frenzy, chanting and clanging cymbals. In school he had a classfellow, Agya Ram, a very vicious boy who gambled and cheated. Suddenly this boy ran away, lived with sadhus, and returned after a year completely transformed into a humble, honest person. Then Des Raj wanted to run away and do the same, but his elder brother would not let him go. Des Raj was 15 years old when his father died and this elder brother became his guardian. They shifted to Peshawar and Des Raj took the job of a compounder in the dispensary of a local doctor. He met Bhai Labh Singh who ran a sweetmeat and milk shop. Also he became acquainted with a shopkeeper, Saieen Das, who sold paan and cigarettes. Those days he hungered to see God and would visit sadhus and astrologers and temples. One day he said to Saieen Das, "I want to leave my job and go to the Ganges. My life here is useless. Day and night I long to have a glimpse of God ... His physical manifestation ... I don't know how or where, but I want to leave this place and find Him."

Saieen Das assured his friend that he could have a glimpse of God without going away, and said, "I'll take you to Baba Boota Singh."

It was winter and freezing cold. Des Raj got up at 4:00 a.m. and went along with Saieen Das to Baba Boota Singh's residence to attend a *sangat*. "My first reaction as I sat listening to him was of awe, even fear," he narrated to me. "Boota Singh had a jet-black beard even at the age of 65 and very impressive eyes and forehead. A glowing face . . . I used to hate Sikhs and had never heard a line from the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Baba Boota Singh's chanting and exalted rendering of Guru Nanak's *baani* soothed me. A chastening feeling.

"Several times I attended these morning *sangats*. On the fourth day I returned in the evening. I fell at Baba Boota Singh's feet, started crying and begged him to show me the God he had been talking about. 'So soon?' he asked. He embraced me and patted my back with his strong hand and asked, 'What do you believe in?'

" 'The *Bhagavad-Gita,*' I replied.

" 'Go and bring me some offering,' he instructed me. 'That is the first condition of a Guru.'

" I went out and bought milk sweets and returned, still gripped with awe. He took me out on his open roof, had me sit down crosslegged before him and commanded, 'Sit with consciousness!' I straightened up and sat more alertly. 'Be conscious!' he again commanded. 'Do you study the *Gita* every day?'

" 'Yes,' I replied.

" 'Do you understand the eleventh chapter?'

" 'Yes.'

" He opened this chapter, in which Lord Krishna gives the resplendent cosmic vision of God to Arjuna.

'Do you know the meaning of this cosmic vision?'

" 'No,' I admitted.

" 'Look at me!' he commanded sharply. He narrated the elements of the cosmos and of the human body, then asked me, 'When the human body is destroyed, where does the spirit go?' He waved his hand vertically twice with lightning speed and asked me sternly, 'Where will *this* go? This is everything. What else are you seeking in this world? This is within you. Look!' Again he waved his hand rapidly twice vertically. And I became his disciple. Then he added, 'There is no difference between you and I.' Thus he made me his equal and thereby a most devoted disciple."

Secretary Ram Saran, originally from Peshawar, is modest and known for being self-effacing. He wears a white turban with a long, limp plum down his back. Unlike his colleagues he is casual in his dress, unmindful of shoes or missing buttons because he gets so wrapped up in what he does.

Once his wife Shanti went to a *sangat* of Shehanshah. She carried her little son and was accompanied by a friend who had no children. To be helpful the friend took Shanti's baby in her arms and devotees at the *sangat* thought the son was hers. When asked by one of the devotees, "Is that beautiful baby yours?" Shanti replied, "Yes." Shehanshah overheard and asked her, "Are you sincere or just pretending?" Shanti fell at his feet and exclaimed, "The child *is* hers!" Shehanshah blessed her and from that day her son belonged to her friend. A most touching sacrifice and sharing of fertility, for Shanti has two other sons as well.

Amar Singh of Patiala, owner of a shop that makes rubber stamps, is the chief editor of the monthly

journal, *Sant Nirankari* published in five languages including English. He was a staunch Akali Sikh and swung over to support of the Mission with the same fervour. In Sikh-dominated Patiala he met with great opposition at first, but he persevered. He would offer his only room to guests and sleep with his family out on the verandah even in the winter cold. His thickly flowing white beard and coppery lined face give him a Biblical look.

The other three Stars are: joint secretary Babu Mahadev Singh, the most popular figure of the Mission; the millionaire Suraj Mohan who served Baba for years like an ordinary guard or fanning him in the *sangats* and is now in charge of *samagams* and the Delhi bhavan's community kitchen; and treasurer Kotu Mal, a Sindhi accountant in charge of the Paharganj branch in Delhi.

In the spiritual firmament of the Nirankaris, Baba Gurbachan Singh is the shining Sun and Rajmata the Moon. In Nirankari calendars showing multicoloured reproductions of the spiritual zodiac, Baba and Rajmata preside over their Seven Stars forming the executive board. In almost every home of the lower strata such a calendar is displayed along with reproductions of the holy couple. In well-to-do homes Baba's large framed photograph smiles in plush drawing rooms. Every Nirankari taxi driver has Baba's photo tucked by his steering wheel, for protection against accidents.

Besides the Seven Stars the Nirankari hierarchy has eight zonal chiefs under whom local branches function. All the collections at the *sangats* are scrupulously counted and sent to the main office. When I questioned contributors who are businessmen, government officials or accountants, not one even

hinted at the possibility of any devotee keeping a single rupee to himself.

Today the Mission has 354 branches—27 abroad and the rest in India. Ninty-eight of these branches have bhavans in India. Seven overseas bhavans have been planned in England, the U.S.A., Canada and Hong Kong.

Some of these property holdings are easily worth a million rupees each. They are run by zonal or local Parmukhs (local chiefs). Even the poorest devotee voluntarily contributes at least a rupee every month to his local branch because this offering is in expression of his spiritual satisfaction. Hence the Mission's wealth.

The office of the Delhi bhavan is run by Mangal Sain who was formerly a welder. He took the *gian* in 1962 and joined the Sant Nirankari School in Paharganj as a peon ringing the bell and cleaning the floors. In the process he got his education and finally shifted to the head office where he worked single-handed for many years looking after land reforming, construction, administration, publication. Now the office has more than 50 people working in its diverse sections, but Mangal Sain is still the indispensable man at the desk.

A typical bhavan is a complex of a prayer hall, guest rooms, a library and the community kitchen. The Delhi and Bombay bhavans have a constant flow of foreign guests staying for spiritual refills. The Nirankari literature published in many languages is available in all the bhavans with the latest proclamations, news of the Mission and Baba and *samagams,* along with spiritual articles written by various devotees.

The choice of a new Star or zonal head lies entirely with Baba, whose judgment is unquestioned.

When he advises or commands, 'Marry this woman', 'Leave your job', 'Move to such and such town', or chooses a nominee, or fills the vacancy of a Star, his word is final. His decisions are never questioned because he is regarded as God's representative on earth, apart from being considered the repository of the collective wisdom and consciousness of his followers. Nobody knows on whom his grace will descend. Sometimes members of the Mission may be thinking of a particular person to fill a vacancy but Baba's choice surprises them and then they feel convinced of his wisdom. Baba's own coronation came as a surprise even to himself. He never dreamed of it, nor did the Seven Stars under Shehanshah who himself did not know until the inner voice of Nirankar decided the issue.

Baba Gurbachan Singh's followers accord him all the attributes of a prophet. They quote scriptures to prove that knowledge of God can be revealed only by a Knower, such as their Baba. The *Bhagavad-Gita:* "Consult Him who knows Me. Bow to Him and He will reveal to you my real form." The Bible: "Ask and it shall be given unto you; seek and you shall find; knock and it shall be opened unto you." The *Quran*: "Trust His Messenger and you will be one with Truth." The *Adi Granth*: "I surrendered to the True Master and He revealed God, the All-Pervading."

Nirankaris do not prefix their names with 'Sardar', 'Shriman', 'Lala', or 'Mister', but with 'Sant' (saint), regardless of sex or age. The chief and the servant, the princess and the scavenger are all 'Sants'. When eating in company they feed the first morsel to each other and ask their companions to sip from each others' glasses. When the Guru or a Star or a Par-

mukh conducts a *sangat* his feet are washed by devotees and the water is caught in a container and passed through the congregation as a holy drink. This levels everyone and brings them nearer to each other and to God.

The first time I attended a *samagam,* two years ago on the Delhi Ramlila Grounds, I was startled to see an army of uniformed soldiers controlling traffic and conducting participants. A white-turbaned senior official wearing epaulettes and leather crossbelts commanded them with a whistle. All these were Nirankaris of the Seva Dal wing of the Mission.

After repeated armed onslaughts against Nirankari gatherings it was felt that a uniformed defence corps should be set up for protection and maintenance of discipline. This was the beginning of the Sant Nirankari Seva Dal in 1954. Only a handful of *sevadars* (volunteers) made up the first batch. Today they total 6,500 and are a formidable power of peaceful discipline.

The supreme controlling body of the Seva Dal is the Seva Dal Board which supervises and plans and serves as a liaison with Sant Nirankari Mandal. According to its 1972 amended constitution it has four people: Chairman Ram Saran and three members—B.S. Nirman, K.R. Chadha and G.S. Premi. The administration is run by the Central Seva Dal Adhikaris (administrators) with these ranks: Mukhya Sanchalak (chief organizer), two Upmukhya Sanchalaks (administrative organizer and field organizer), Mukhya Shikshak (commander-in-chief) and Upmukhya Shikshak (deputy commander-in-chief). The strength of these Adhikaris can be enhanced by the Seva Dal Board depending on need.

These volunteer men and women are enrolled all

over India and abroad, wherever the Mission has branches. Each city or town is allotted a unit classification by headquarters. Each branch is allowed one unit except for Delhi, which has six.

Seva Dals are divided into classes A, B and C. If a unit has more than 100 members (such as in Bombay, Delhi and Chandigarh), it is an 'A' class branch controlled by one Sanchalak (organizer), one Shikshak (commander) and two assistants. For the 'B' category of 50 to 100 members there is one Sanchalak, one Shikshak and one assistant. The 'C' class has a membership of only 25 to 50 with a Shikshak but no Sanchalak. Units of less than 25 are run by one of the volunteer members appointed by the Parmukh of the branch. No unit can be formed with less than 10 members.

The Commander-in-chief (Mukhya Shikshak) has an impressive khaki uniform with four flap-buttoned pockets, a leather crossbelt, and a whistle. The Sanchalak wears a khaki cloth belt and a khaki bush shirt with a tongue-shaped maroon badge on each shoulder with the white letters S.N.S.D. (Sant Nirankari Seva Dal). A red twine cord looped around the left shoulder dives into the upper pocket with a guard whistle. The Shikshak wears the same uniform as the Sanchalak but with black badges and a leather belt. All these officials wear black shoes and white turbans.

The uniform of a Seva Dal soldier is khaki shorts and khaki shirt with two flap-buttoned pockets and small shoulder badges, white Gandhi cap or white turban, black knee socks, white canvas shoes for *sangat* duty and games and black leather shoes for parade. They are equipped with a five-foot-long *lathi,* painted red except for the nine-inch end which is painted white.

Women wear long-sleeved sky-blue kameezes with round neck and black piping at sleeve cuffs and neck, white shalwars, white georgette chunnis, navy blue socks and white canvas shoes.

These uniforms are obtained by members at their own cost. Only the belt and badges are supplied free by the central office. If they lose either they have to get them replaced from the centre at their own cost.

Newly-selected members are given a three-month training course. The age range of membership is between 16 and 40 for males and 13 and 30 for females (preferably unmarried young girls who have more time and are more active). Besides this first category of active membership there is a second, less-rigorous category for which the joining age limit is 45. These secondary members wear the same uniform but the women are exempted from physical training and parades and are required only for other duties such as helping at *sangats* and in bhavans. All members are trained to be absolutely gentle and polite, even in the most provoking situations, and to remain calm even in danger. This self-control is one of the most important disciplines of a *sevadar*.

At the annual *samagams* and other special functions Baba and Rajmata receive a military salute from the Seva Dal army, the two sit on their throne while all others stand. If there is a chief guest, he or she sits with the holy couple.

I met Dev Raj Vijh, one of the most ardent workers of the Seva Dal. He was a body-builder and a weight-lifter in the '50s in Delhi. When he took the *gian* his father would not let him enter the house if he came late from *sangats* or Seva Dal work. Now in Lucknow working with a foreign organization, he is

Shikshak of the Seva Dal and a quiet crusader. Still only 35, he is slim and handsome and emanates tremendous warmth. I asked him, "What training do you give ?"

"P.T., parades and rallies. We have specialized instructors among our members who set up training camps for us at which we learn to handle various situations fearlessly."

"With what weapons?"

"*Lathis.* But we have jousting bouts and mock battles with tin swords and shields."

"No guns?"

"No. Babaji is thinking of dispensing even with our sticks. We might stop the use of *lathis* and train only our minds to handle situations because ours is a non-violent spiritual force. Though I carry a *lathi* I have never needed to use it. You can't preach spiritualism with a weapon in your hand."

The *sevadars* do the entire arranging of *sangats,* look after the bhavans, the community kitchen, the big *samagams* and every aspect of service in the organization. They hoist canopies, pitch tents, serve water, look after bicycles and shoes, sweep and scrub floors, spread mats, arrange stages and lights, set up book stalls and conduct people to seats. At the *sangats* I have always found extreme neatness, a sense of purity. There are no sweepers or scavengers in the bhavans. The *sevadars* do these jobs and also gardening, repairing, painting, and whitewashing—an ideal example of self-help.

7

Philosophy of the Gian

TO START WITH, the *gian* or knowledge of God was given only by the Guru. As the Mission spread and attracted more seekers, it became physically impossible for the Guru to dispense the *gian* by himself. So he nominated a few of his most enlightened disciples to help transmit the secret light. Today all the Seven Stars, zonal heads, Parmukhs of districts, those in charge of the bhavans, many heads of local branches, and other specially-chosen saints including Rajmata and many other women, are authorized to dispense the *gian*. Selections are made only by Baba. There are now 214 such nominees in India plus 11 who carry on the Mission's propagation abroad. In Bombay, 11 such apostles dispense the *gian* in various languages. The much larger Delhi contingent includes Chadha, Kapila, Shastriji, Saqi and Bhatia. Puri was specially sent abroad to organize the fast-spreading *sangats* in other countries and give them organizational shape. Chandigarh has nine nominee-apostles, two of them I.A.S. officers and one a Brigadier. A regular certificate is issued to these nominees by the Head Office of the Mission, authorizing each one to reveal this divine knowledge.

Before the *gian* is given the initiator explains the five principles of the Mission, which are already known to the recipient, but elaborates upon them with the magnetism of personal conviction to remove doubts. After discussing the five principles, the *gian* is dispensed to the seeker with astonishing simplicity stripped of any ritual or halo. According to Nirankaris, this *gian* is instant knowledge of Nirankar or the Formless God. To know Nirankar one has not to undergo long penances and wild searches and tortures or recount the name of some deity over a million times. One has simply to come to the Knower—who today is Baba Gurbachan Singh—and he will reveal God in a flash.

I had many sessions with Baba and his nominee-apostles regarding the philosophy of the *gian*. In meetings and conversations with individuals I gathered the essence of their five publicized principles.

1. *Nothing is ours. All our possessions—physical, mental, material—are a divine loan which we must utilize only as trustees and not as masters.*

Nirankaris say we are all prone to be egotistical about our bodies. A beautiful woman may not realise that one day she will be wrinkled and will finally decay into dust. She may be proud and arrogant about her beauty instead of considering it a gift from God that should be used humbly in His service. Daily we hear about death and know that each of us must die. We know, but we *do not know*. Complexes, quarrels and worries stem from non-knowledge of this very basic truth. We must face the fact of death, not with horror but calmly, in the knowledge that our bodies are only loaned to us by God for this temporary existence. Then comes the mind, which can be brilliant or simple, tortured or serene. When one starts regarding his

Shehanshah Baba Avtar Singh and Jagatmata Budhwanti

Baba Boota Singh (*garlanded*) with his early disciples

His Holiness Baba Gurbachan Singh



Rajmata Kulwant Kaur



Holy Couple being weighed in currency notes during the Silver Jubilee Samagam in 1972

Baba's family—(*left to right*) Swaran, Jagjit, Manmohan (daughters), Baba, Rajmata, Hardev Singh (son) and Niranjan Kaur (daughter)

Young Gurbachan and Kulwant Kaur—early years of marriage





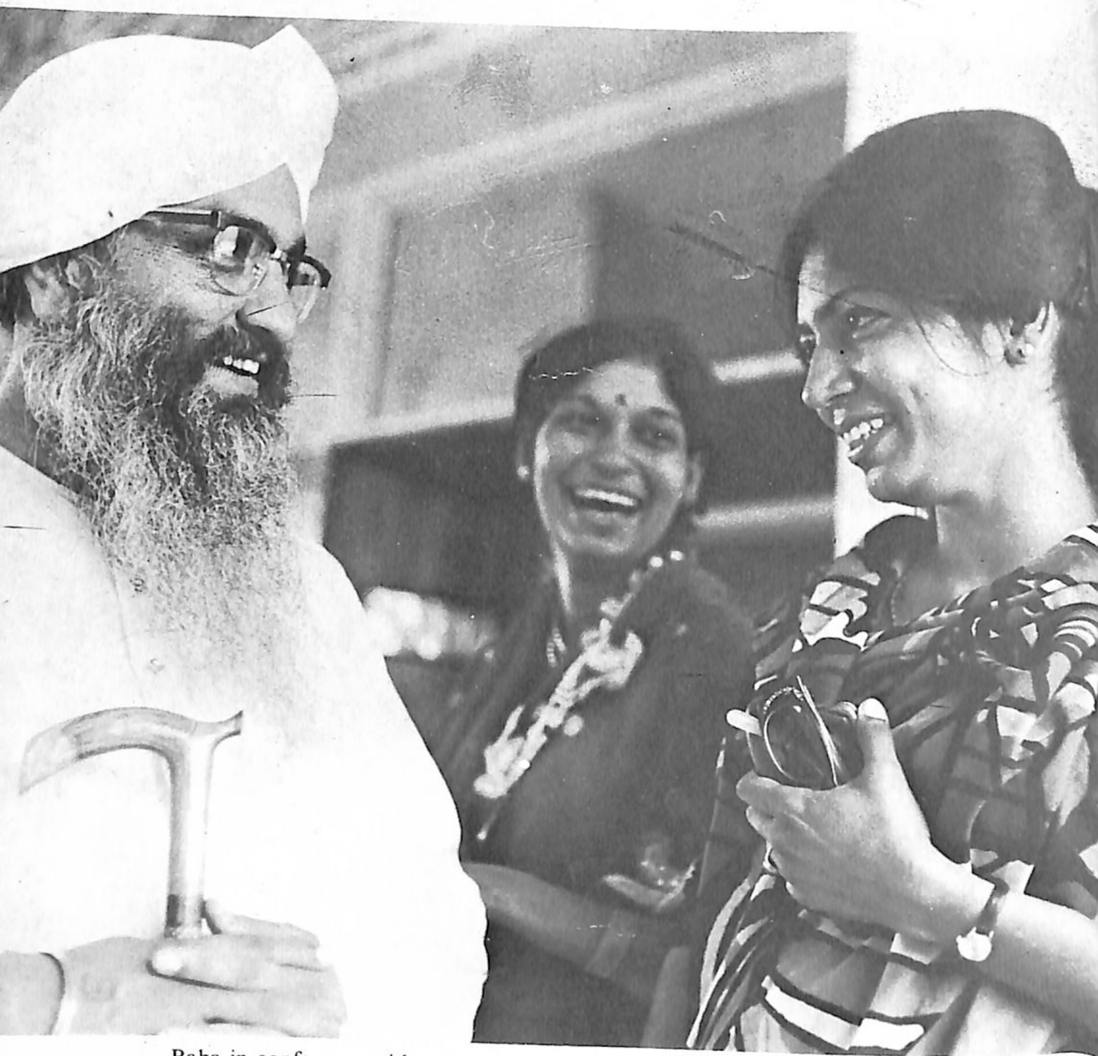
Baba has perfect rapport even with his humblest devotee

Rajmata plays the *dholak* while Baba keeps time



Baba dispensing the *gian* to a group of seekers

Baba supervising the feeding of cattle



Baba in conference with two of his disciples


President Bhai Labh Singh


Vice-President Dr. Des Raj

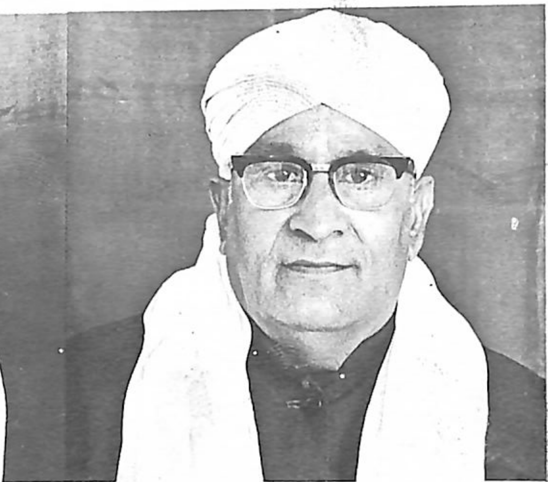

Secretary Bhai Ram Saran


Joint Secretary Babu Mahadev Singh

Seven Stars—
Members of the
Executive Body
of Sant Nirankari
Mandal


Finance-in-charge Bhagat Kotu Mal


Publication-in-charge Bhai Amar Singh


Social Welfare Bhai Suraj Mohan

A *sangat* presided over by Baba

A junior class in the Sant Nirankari Girls H.S. School in Delhi

The dispensary attached with Delhi Satsang bhavan



Nirankari motor workshop—
Baba's pet hobby

Five chiefs of Sant Nirankari Seva Dal—(*left to right*) Upmukhya shikshak Joginder Singh Khurana, upmukhya sanchalak Gopal Singh Premi, mukhya shikshak Balwant Singh Nirman, upmukhya sanchalak Khem Raj Chaddha, and mukhya shikshak Partap Singh

Community lunch (*langar*) at a bhavan

Nirankari procession at Bombay

Mission now has its centres all over the world which Baba visits on his periodical foreign tours. Here Baba and Rajmata, during their world tour of 1970, are being introduced by secretary K.R. Chaddha to Mayor of Slough (U.K.)

Delhi bhavan









Mayor of Berkeley (San Fransisco) receiving Baba during Baba's recent foreign tour in 1973

Baba in Manila—Jose D. Ingles, under secretary, foreign affairs in Philippines (*sitting extreme left*) and Cirilo J. Pardes, secretary general, World Peace Congress (*sitting extreme right*) meeting Baba. Matoji, president, Sant Nirankari Mandal, Manila, is seen distributing Mission literature in the background

mental superiority as due entirely to himself he shuts out the True Giver and goes astray, becoming a self-opinionated fool. He loses sight of the fact that the mind must die with the body and until then should be used with humility and honesty to help others. The same is true of our worldly possessions. These are all gifts from God which we must ultimately surrender back to Him. Therefore in this life we must take care of these gifts, sharing them with others in constant gratitude to God.

2. *No discrimination based on caste, creed, colour, religion or worldly status.*

Baba regards all humanity, of various colours, castes, and religions, as 'flowers of different kinds in the same garden'. Wars have always been fought on an ideological, religious or geographical basis. Today world tensions are seething over all these prejudices. One nation considers itself superior to another, one religion more true than others, whites more intelligent and refined than the blacks and the blacks hitting back with increasing knowledge and self-assertion. Many who preach brotherhood and peace kill each other for these ideals. People tend to fear and hate each other for their differences. But the Nirankaris quote ancient gurus and saints to prove that all humanity is one, sprung from the same source. Only when we forget that do we hate instead of love. Guru Gobind Singh: "One Father and we are all His children." Tulsidas in his *Ramacharita Manas* "God doesn't question your caste. Whosoever worships Him belongs to Him." The poet Kabir: "First came God's Light and out of this all His creations. From one Light this whole Universe emerged. So who is superior or inferior?" Nirankaris emphasize these sayings to assert

that our differences are only superficial while inside we are all equal and the same.

3. *No criticism of anyone's diet or dress, as this creates conflict and breeds hatred.*

Food and clothing are basic physical needs, differing with climates, cultures and traditions. Therefore the well-clothed northerners should not consider the half-naked southerners immoral. Nor should a vegetarian Brahmin despise an Eskimo for eating meat—almost the only food available in the frozen north. One should feel free to eat pork, fish, lobsters steaming in a pot of boiling water, or simple vegetables. One may live only on milk and fruits or eat spicy curries. This should be left to individual desires and needs because diet, the Nirankaris declare, has nothing to do with one's degree of spirituality. Thus also with drinking and smoking, so long as these are done in moderation.

Similarly with one's appearance. One may have a long beard or a clean-shaven face; a crewcut, shoulder-length curls or waist-length hair confined under a turban; a shaven head with tonsure or pigtail. An Arab in flowing white headgear and robes for protection against the desert sun should neither scorn nor be scorned by an Indian wearing a tucked-up dhoti or an Englishman in his woollen suit. People should not criticize, judge or despise each other for these external differences and preferences. So many of these have become the basis for taboos which the Nirankaris abolish in favour of equality and love.

4. *No renunciation of the world. One should continue performing one's normal vocations and functions of life and be always righteous.*

God has put us into this earthly life to live in it, not to retreat from it, say the Nirankaris. Nobody

should shun the normal activities and functions of life. God is within you. You need not run away to solitary hide-aways in forests and deserts in search of Him. The Vedas, the *Bhagavad-Gita* and Guru Nanak are frequently quoted by the Nirankaris as proofs that one must live in this world, involved with other people and endeavouring to live a normal life as wife or husband, raising children and taking part in community and world affairs. But always with a sense of detachment. This philosophy of attachment with detachment, rooted in the Hindu Upanishads and the *Bhagavad-Gita* and carried forward by various saints through the centuries, is not contradictory. "Feel detached and enjoy the world." is a line from *Yajurveda*. This detachment is a state of mind which only enlightened souls attain. God, according to the Nirankaris, is not an awesome or benevolent being sitting on a throne high above us in judgement, pasting black stars against our names for every misdeed or gold stars for good actions. He is not above us, but around us and within us every moment. One who advocates renunciation is in fact implying that the society is unfit for spiritual people. The Nirankaris vehemently condemn this attitude, believing that daily life needs the spiritualism of honest, noble, loving and humble people to keep society fit to live in. They believe that Baba is bringing spiritualism into every aspect of life—business, politics, agriculture, industry, education, marital and family relations.

Baba summed it up to me: "There are people who love this world and all their possessions, forgetting their God; others who love God and despise all things of the world. And there are some who love both God and everything in this world He has

created. A true Nirankari has this third attitude."

5. *No divulgence of the Divine Secret of the gian except with the permission of the True Master.*

This last principle is for discipline and to preserve the special parapsychic relation with the Guru. It binds each devotee to Baba by a deep, personal commitment which he cannot break. If he does, he cheats himself and suffers guilt.

Most of the Nirankaris I talked to had mentioned the experience of receiving the *gian* and it baffled me. What was this divine peep show? Were they being hypnotized? Were they like the people caught together naked in a Turkish *hamam* who, when they emerge from the steaming bath room, out of self-defence pretend to be clothed? Why were they not allowed to tell me what this *gian* is? Each devotee was being prescribed the same five principles, the same Ultimate Remedy, and was initiated into the Brotherhood in the same way by this same glimpse of God. What was it? A flash of light? Or a magical rite? Baba proclaims that it is nothing physically dazzling or occult. Many converts I met had been surprised by its simplicity and that it is dispensed to anyone who asks for it. Baba has taken away the tortuous process of reaching God, claiming to have made Him as simple and available as the sun. Also it is not merely the words, but the way they are received. Just as a bride and bridegroom, listening to the priest chanting the sacred words that bind them in matrimony, are affected in a way that the wedding guests cannot be, so is with the *gian*. Its simple words become remarkable and meaningful and invested with a magical halo only for the one who seeks them.

During the giving of the *gian* the philosophy of

the Nirankar is explained: This universe is composed of nine elements—earth, water, fire, sun, moon, stars, air, sound, life. These nine elements are constantly moving. Beyond them is God, the Supreme Soul. Our bodies contain five elements—earth, water, fire, air, sound. And beyond these five is Soul, the divine spark which controls our lives. So also in the Universe the Nirankar—Deathless, Formless, Nameless—pervades and controls everything. The universe is one vast body with God as its soul.

When we die each element in us returns to its counterpart in the universe. The sixth element, the *atma* (soul) merges with the *paramatma* (supersoul) or God. The Guru connects individual souls with the Supreme Soul, the Nirankar. This connecting is done by giving the *gian*—the knowledge of God. It is instantaneous. Baba explained this to me by relating an ancient story: King Janaka, father of Sita, asked Ashtavakra—the child sage whose body was crooked in eight places—to give him the Brahma gian or the Universal Knowledge. Ashtavakra gave this knowledge to Janaka who had one foot in the stirrup in a great hurry to be off. Before he could swing his other leg over his horse he had the Brahma gian. "It's that quick," Baba beamed, and added, "The ancient royal guru Vashisht said to Rama, 'Oh Rama, it takes more time to crush a flower than to realize God.'"

When Baba reveals God to an aspirant, the Nirankaris believe that all the divine attributes of God are at once transmitted to the aspirant, who in that instant of revelation identifies himself completely with God. He does not have to be pure and sinless to receive this *gian*; receiving the *gian* makes him pure. It is a verbal baptism.

created. A true Nirankari has this third attitude."

5. *No divulgence of the Divine Secret of the gian except with the permission of the True Master.*

This last principle is for discipline and to preserve the special parapsychic relation with the Guru. It binds each devotee to Baba by a deep, personal commitment which he cannot break. If he does, he cheats himself and suffers guilt.

Most of the Nirankaris I talked to had mentioned the experience of receiving the *gian* and it baffled me. What was this divine peep show? Were they being hypnotized? Were they like the people caught together naked in a Turkish *hamam* who, when they emerge from the steaming bath room, out of self-defence pretend to be clothed? Why were they not allowed to tell me what this *gian* is? Each devotee was being prescribed the same five principles, the same Ultimate Remedy, and was initiated into the Brotherhood in the same way by this same glimpse of God. What was it? A flash of light? Or a magical rite? Baba proclaims that it is nothing physically dazzling or occult. Many converts I met had been surprised by its simplicity and that it is dispensed to anyone who asks for it. Baba has taken away the tortuous process of reaching God, claiming to have made Him as simple and available as the sun. Also it is not merely the words, but the way they are received. Just as a bride and bridegroom, listening to the priest chanting the sacred words that bind them in matrimony, are affected in a way that the wedding guests cannot be, so is with the *gian*. Its simple words become remarkable and meaningful and invested with a magical halo only for the one who seeks them.

During the giving of the *gian* the philosophy of

the Nirankar is explained: This universe is composed of nine elements—earth, water, fire, sun, moon, stars, air, sound, life. These nine elements are constantly moving. Beyond them is God, the Supreme Soul. Our bodies contain five elements—earth, water, fire, air, sound. And beyond these five is Soul, the divine spark which controls our lives. So also in the Universe the Nirankar—Deathless, Formless, Nameless—pervades and controls everything. The universe is one vast body with God as its soul.

When we die each element in us returns to its counterpart in the universe. The sixth element, the *atma* (soul) merges with the *paramatma* (supersoul) or God. The Guru connects individual souls with the Supreme Soul, the Nirankar. This connecting is done by giving the *gian*—the knowledge of God. It is instantaneous. Baba explained this to me by relating an ancient story: King Janaka, father of Sita, asked Ashtavakra—the child sage whose body was crooked in eight places—to give him the Brahma gian or the Universal Knowledge. Ashtavakra gave this knowledge to Janaka who had one foot in the stirrup in a great hurry to be off. Before he could swing his other leg over his horse he had the Brahma gian. "It's that quick," Baba beamed, and added, "The ancient royal guru Vashisht said to Rama, 'Oh Rama, it takes more time to crush a flower than to realize God.'"

When Baba reveals God to an aspirant, the Nirankaris believe that all the divine attributes of God are at once transmitted to the aspirant, who in that instant of revelation identifies himself completely with God. He does not have to be pure and sinless to receive this *gian*; receiving the *gian* makes him pure. It is a verbal baptism.

Habitual words in Nirankari conversations are: *bakhshish* (grace), *rehmat* (kindness), *charan pau* (grace my house with your feet). Each Nirankari refers to himself as a 'das,' meaning 'humble servant,' and to the other person as a 'mahapursh' (great man). Baba Gurbachan Singh is the 'Satguru' (True Master) and his wife Kulwant Kaur is 'Rajmata' (Royal Mother). Nirankaris greet each other with 'Dhan Nirankar' (Glory to the Formless). The epithet 'Nirankari' is added to stores, auto agencies, bakeries, construction companies, photographic shops, tent houses, roadway corporations, even chit funds, to attract the Fraternity. There is even a cyclostyled Nirankari telephone directory.

The ceremony of footwashing and drinking this water as holy was started by Dr. Des Raj in Peshawar in 1945 when Baba Avtar Singh paid one of his numerous visits to that city. It was summer and he had ice cold water ready for his Guru's feet. "I was so elated about his visit that I just wanted to wash his feet and drink the water," he told me. When he had done so and sipped the water Baba Avtar Singh smiled and Des Raj thought he had done something wrong. But Shehanshah beamed, "What I have wished, you have done, my son. Your action is correct, noble." After that, whenever Shehanshah visited Des Raj's house he carried out the same ceremony. He would bring out a new towel, a large bowl kept only for this purpose and cold or hot water as needed and would wash his Guru's feet with great love and reverence, as to a sacred image. Gradually this practice spread to the *sangats* and private gatherings and became a basic custom of the Brotherhood.

Washing the feet of a stone image or of a holy man

has been a practice among the Hindus for centuries. This water, called *charanamrit* (foot nectar), is drunk by the devotees. Even today in Hindu temples the footwash of the stone images, mixed with sugar, sliced fruits and spices, is distributed to devotees as a *prashad* called *charnamrit*. Footwashing is an expression of humility, love and reverence. Lord Krishna washed the feet of his poor old classfellow Brahmin friend Sudama when the latter visited him in his royal palace, and everyone was amazed. The water of the Pampasur pond had always been dirty and remained so despite the efforts of various sadhus. But when the feet of the poor tribal woman Bhilini—lowliest and humblest of Rama's devotees—were washed in it, the entire pond became crystal clear.

The Nirankaris wash the feet of any apostle-nominee or any fellow Nirankari who conducts their *sangats* and drink this footwash, considering it purified by humility and love. Baba Gurbachan Singh's footwash, the most holy, is stored in the Delhi bhavan in a large drum with a tap so that devotees can come fill their phials and glasses. When Baba is away on long tours, the footwash of other Nirankaris is substituted. They use footwash as the most effective medicine, much as the devout Hindus use the Ganges water and the Muslims the *zamzam* (water) from a fountain in Mecca. There have been many cases in which a fatally ill Nirankari has been revived by a sip of foot nectar. Dr. Des Raj described to me the hopeless case of a Peshawar girl, Vidya, dying of pneumonia. The doctors had given her up and she was laid on the floor in accordance with the Hindu aversion to dying in a bed. Des Raj put aside all his own medical knowledge and rushed to wash Baba Avtar Singh's feet. He brought

the fresh nectar to Vidya and made her drink from it. To everyone's amazement she revived and daily improved to complete health.

The ceremony of footwashing is done not only in reverence to a leader but to promote a sense of humility and equality. Sometimes Baba Avtar Singh washed the feet of his followers and drank this water. This inter-relationship is an important feature of the Nirankari movement, raising the lowest to the highest, socially and spiritually.

8

The Man and The Guru

BABA GURBACHAN SINGH is a modern guru. He is a motor mechanic, a homoeopath, a cow-breeder, an expert on seeds and soil, and a badminton player.

His mother Budhwanti bore several children who died. After one healthy daughter Nand Kaur, she gave birth to Gurbachan Singh in a small, dingy room in the Undar Shahar neighbourhood of Peshawar city on December 10, 1930. Sweets were distributed joyfully. It was winter and everyone predicted that the season, the position of his stars and his round features with large eyes indicated he would be cool-tempered. As a child he played in the lap of Baba Boota Singh, who loved the chubby little boy because he was gentle and seldom whiny or given to temper tantrums. He was called 'Bholaji' (the innocent one) since he talked little, seldom argued and would obey at once.

Gurbachan's birth was followed by two brothers—Sajjan Singh (who died in 1948) and Joginder Singh, who was given by Avtar Singh to his, at that time, childless sister—and a sister Charanjit Kaur. Gurbachan grew up in this large family, among many

relatives, as a subdued child. He would avoid all quarrels, preferring to submit rather than fight, and when others shouted he would remain quiet. Among his brothers, sisters and classfellows he was known as a peacemaker. He was very fond of eating—especially rich, fattening things from his father's bakery. He overate all through his growing years and, as a result, he was always plump. Sometimes he even held eating contests with his friends, which he often won. At the age of nine he was once flying a kite from the roof of a one-storey house when he fell and broke his leg. He wore the cast patiently and had no more serious mishaps.

As a child Gurbachan sat in the family bakery shop wondering why his father was throwing away money in the service of his Guru, Boota Singh. This had the effect of engulfing him in strong business and spiritual currents and making him conscious of two worlds. The family shifted to Rawalpindi but the bakery business remained in Peshawar, run by partners.

Gurbachan continued his studies in Khalsa High School, Rawalpindi, and finished his matriculation despite the Hindu-Muslim riots which erupted as a prelude to the Partition, six months later. In March 1947 Kulwant Kaur, her elder sister and her parents fled from their riot-torn village and came to stay with Baba Avtar Singh's family. In this war-charged atmosphere of tension and danger a few months before the Partition, Gurbachan Singh, hardly 17, was married to Kulwant Kaur, an attractive girl with a robust personality. Only 22 days his junior, she was born on New Year Day in 1931, in village Titral, district Campbellpore (now in northwest Pakistan).

Her father, Sardar Manna Singh, was a merchant who had seed-crushing machines to extract oil, and ran a general store. Her mother Somawanti is settled in Delhi in the Nirankari Colony to be near her daughter.

Kulwant Kaur and Gurbachan Singh had the same great grandfather, Ram Singh, who had three sons: Mukha Singh, Mitha Singh and Rattan Singh. Mukha's son was Avtar Singh; Rattan's daughter was Somawanti. In this way Kulwant Kaur and Gurbachan Singh have strong blood ties; also emotional—they played together as toddlers, and when they grew up often met at family get-togethers.

Coming from a hardy, practical business family of people who worked with their own hands, Kulwant Kaur had the vigour of a peasant and the sophistication of a city girl. The young couple felt a complete sense of harmony and total fulfilment. Gurbachan was quiet and shy, complementing his wife who had tremendous enthusiasm and energy to weave in all the loose threads of family relationships and ally them with a larger fraternity.

During the Partition in 1947 Hindu and Sikh families of Rawalpindi suffered the worst. When the massacre broke out in mid-August, thousands of refugees fled to the famous Wah Camp in the North-West Frontier area. Seventeen-year-old Gurbachan Singh took charge of his complete family complex, in-laws, and some other Nirankari families—in total about 150—for the six weeks of their stay. Baba Avtar Singh, with some followers, had meanwhile managed to fly to Delhi where he had some relatives. Young Gurbachan kept his group cheerful in the camp despite their dangerous situation and organized daily *sangats*.

Finally everyone was crammed into a goods train and taken to Jullundur, where they lived in another camp in a state of continued uncertainty for several weeks. By his quiet leadership and faith, Gurbachan continued to maintain the morale of his family and followers. Then they all shifted to Delhi. Gurbachan was appalled by this bloody massacre which in one stroke had cut down a million lives and washed away their possessions. Where had all that material wealth gone? And where had all those souls gone? For him the Partition was a spiritual experience.

His uncle Gopal Singh Premi had a business in motor spare parts on Hamilton Road at Kashmere Gate. Gurbachan joined him as a partner in running Nirankari Motors and settled down to a full married life, living with his parents in the Paharganj area till several years later, when they all moved into the newly-built Nirankari bhavan. He continued his flourishing trade until 1963, when he was crowned as the new Guru, then surrendered his partnership to his wife who still holds it today. He took joy in providing well for his family of four daughters—Niranjan Kaur, Manmohan Kaur, Jagjit Kaur and Swaran Kaur—and one son Hardev Singh, all born between 1952 and 1959.

As a young businessman Gurbachan was called 'Sethji', the term used for prosperous Hindu merchants. Someone had told him as a child, looking at his palm and close-knit extended fingers, that he would have money but would not keep it because there are chinks between his fingers for things to trickle out. While in business he would help anyone who came to him. When Saqi got a book published he had no money to pay the printers. Every day the press man would come and Saqi would put him off by some pretense.

Gurbachan happened to drop in and learnt about the problem. Immediately he went to his home, brought the full payment and gave it to Saqi. But he despises dishonesty. Once he gave money to a man to pass on to another party. The man spent it himself instead and thereafter avoided Gurbachan. Finally Gurbachan came to know what had hapened. He got hold of the culprit, grabbed him by the arm and slapped him. For once in his life he did lose his temper! The man promised to repay him and did.

Premi describes his nephew in those years as "slow-moving, procrastinating, but very exact and perfect in keeping accounts; thorough to a fault in all his business activities." It was this thoroughness that caused delay in getting things done. If they had to purchase anything, Gurbachan would consider the matter from every angle and explore every source, invariably acquiring the item at the lowest market price.

Since childhood Gurbachan had a sense of the spiritual, but kept this inner world to himself, never sharing his deeper soul with anybody until he became the newest Baba (the word 'Baba' means 'father' or 'grandfather' and out of reverence is accorded to any saintly person regardless of actual age).

Gurbachan accompanied his father on tours as his driver, a privileged spiritual charioteer as Krishna was to Arjuna on the battlefield. It gave Gurbachan tremendous pleasure to drive Shehanshah's party along the dusty roads or up winding hills, listening to spiritual discourses. He would lie under the car to repair some mechanical trouble, sit among the devotees, serve in the *langar* (community kitchen) and perform any duty assigned to him. He would keep humbly aloof while Shehanshah chatted merrily or

discussed problems with his most trusted disciple Babu Mahadev Singh. Shehanshah was closer to this colleague-turned-disciple than he was to his own son. He took his meals on a divan with a little table in front of him and often Babaji would eat with him seated by his side. But Gurbachan would eat, sitting on the floor. This non-indulgence on the part of his father made him grow up with an attitude of detachment and absolutely no expectation of any spiritual inheritance. These qualities of humility, detachment and gentle warmth lay dormant in the prosperous young businessman.

About a year after he had been crowned as the new Baba he still felt uncomfortable in his new role. He told me, "I felt as if I were wearing a coat that didn't fit me properly. My father-turned-devotee, sitting before me on the floor one day, said, 'It is not you speaking, my Guru, but Shehanshah speaking through you and through him Baba Boota Singh. You are Shehanshah; I hear in him your voice.' This lit a new spark of understanding in me, a new light..."

The Guruship's continuity is based on the belief that the spirit of the previous prophet takes up residence in the body of the new one. In the West the idea of reincarnation had slowly gained credence, but only to the extent of believing that humans are reborn as humans; they feel the Hindus take it to the extreme with their doctrine that an evil man may be reborn as a dog or a toad. But the concept of *avtar*—the Formless God taking the form of a human being to exert a more direct influence on his people—is universal. Baba Gurbachan Singh is considered such an *avtar* by his followers.

To his devotees Baba Gurbachan Singh and Shehanshah are indeed the same, though their appearances differ. Selections from *Avtar Baani,* Punjabi hymns composed by Shehanshah in the '50s, are sung in today's *sangats* and interpreted by Baba in his sermons. He weaves in anecdotes from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata,* the Sikh scriptures, the *Quran* and the Bible. He speaks extemporaneously, without any preparation. He learned all this gradually, through his years of growing up so that all his knowledge is at his fingertips. He invents new allegories and mixes them with the wisdom of old fables to make them more relevant and clear to his listeners.

Baba normally gets up at 5.00 a.m. and goes for a one-hour walk. He is so fond of his hefty, genial driver Man Singh that on these early morning walks he often goes to his house, knocks at his door and gets him up to come along. Occasionally other Nirankaris up at that time accompany him and sometimes his wife. These walks are brisk and reflective and chatty. Often they are moving consultation committees because Baba does most of his planning at these times. He returns to bathe (his wife often scrubs his back), dress for the day and breakfast on toast, eggs and tea with Rajmata. No meditation. "I don't have special timings to just sit and meditate. My entire life is one continuous meditation. I'm always with God." He may grace several *sangats* a day in various localities of Delhi. Sometimes he covers even six in different towns, zipping about in his Mercedes followed by two busloads of ardent devotees who supplement attendance and inject spiritual fervour.

After lunch Baba may rest for an hour in the summer, or dip into the garage of the bhavan. Tinkering with

cars is one of his passions and a source of relaxation. As a self-taught mechanic he can open a clock, take out all its parts and reassemble them. For years he has enjoyed purchasing and renovating junky old cars. He has marvellous skill in spotting mistakes in both machinery and human beings.

Accompanied by Man Singh, Baba sometimes goes to inspect old cars, both wearing their grease-smeared workshop clothes. They begin bargaining on the basis of "How much will you pay us to remove this junk?" and invariably manage to buy it for a song. These cars they enjoy renovating together. Recently they purchased a Jeep Wagonaire (station wagon), which was abandoned in an accident, for only 300 rupees and converted it into a 40,000-rupee vehicle. Earlier they bought a used Buick with airconditioning but a totally damaged engine for 12,000 rupees and by the time it emerged from their workshop it was a sleek silver-grey limousine worth 60,000 rupees. They have even replaced the brand-new engine of Baba's favourite black Mercedes with a specially-designed diesel version for economy. When they are out on tours with their foreign cars and stop even for a few hours, Man Singh and the other drivers whisk out huge khaki double-weave car cozies and cover their vehicles with these to keep curious and worshipful hands away.

Man Singh and Baba have been friends for years despite their widely differing social and intellectual levels. Man Singh chuckled, "Babaji is miserly, though he looks wealthy. During our car journey from Teheran to London in a Volkswagon station wagon, in 1967, we camped all the way. We slept in a tent while Babaji and Rajmataji slept in the car in the bitter cold of

rocky deserts. We all shivered at night, but Babaji didn't want to waste money on hotels. He never wants to spend Mission money on personal comforts."

Baba often goes to Jubbulpore during his tours of central India. On the way is the tomb of a fakir and the local belief is that anyone driving by must bow before the tomb and leave some money there as an offering or his car will be in trouble. The first time Baba drove by he disregarded this legend and soon after his car developed some minor ailment which cost him ten rupees. The second year he also passed by and got a flat tyre which cost him five rupees. The third year his car zoomed by and nothing happened. Baba joked to Man Singh, "This fakir's power was limited to only 15 rupees!"

For any building he plans or any bhavan or land he purchases for the Mission Baba calculates every expense and economizes as much as possible. The roof of the Delhi bhavan was 14 feet high. He thought of building a gallery and lowering the previous ceiling to only eight feet. Concerned about the expense of dismantling and wastage, he stood late at night with his workers supervising the job. Through jacks and levers they brought down the ceiling and made the gallery without wasting a brick and keeping the original ceiling intact. Any such problem arising in the Mission makes Baba forget his tea, food and rest. In this sense he is a super executive, but when he sits on his throne as a Guru receiving offerings he does not care who offers what; he is detached.

Baba is well-informed on many subjects because of his fantastic memory for all useful information on medicines, motors, people, agriculture and anything which passes under his observant eyes. Regularly he

listens to news on the radio and watches television, but most of his knowledge comes to him through travelling widely and meeting all sorts of people. He is an action-man, busy 14 hours a day. His greatest contribution has been to extend the Nirankari movement beyond India with six international tours in seven years. As a social reformer he has brought about many inter-caste marriages, inter-province get-togethers and community gatherings of people from all religions and castes sharing meals and problems with amazing harmony and freedom.

Until 1971 he wore his beard tucked and pinned under his chin. But since then he has been leaving it openly flowing. Today he is still plump and enjoys whatever he is given to eat, but with a moderation he never practised in his youth. His wife, after bearing five children in seven and a half years, has also become plump. But neither has any of the modern complexes about the figures; as spiritual leaders their concern is simply for moderation in all things.

Rajmata Kulwant Kaur is both wife and disciple of Baba Gurbachan Singh. She cushions him from a constant invasion of social demands by taking charge of this aspect of their lives. By nature she is much more outgoing and enjoys her role of intense involvement with people who flock to her from morning till night. Generally she wears a white or flowered cotton sari, a gold chain around her neck, gold eartops and has genial crinkles at the corners of her eyes when she smiles.

Besides his primary spiritual work of gracing *sangats* and *samagams,* giving sermons and dispensing the *gian,* Baba supervises the Delhi farm and experiments with cross-breeding of seeds and animals, with outstanding

results. Near the bhavan area he reclaimed 25 acres of marshland and turned it into a fertile farm which grows wheat and vegetables and raises poultry and cattle. Nothing is sold outside. All goes into the community kitchen—*atta,* (wheat flour) vegetables, *ghee,* eggs, milk. 'God's kitchen' never runs dry, even when thousands of people flock for a *sangat*. Delicious *halwa* is served on special occasions as a festive *prashad* taken by every participant.

The bhavan has a fleet of cars—a Buick, a Chevrolet, a Mercedes, a Volkswagon and five small Indian cars, two mini-buses and a few scooter-rickshaws. The Mercedes was given to Baba by his American and Canadian devotees in 1971. The big foreign cars are for Baba and for his colleagues to accompany him to formal occasions and on trips to hill areas or any place within a radius of about 500 miles. To make his local travels easier his devotees now want to present him with a helicopter. For longer distances he jets by Indian Airlines. There are constant heavy demands on his time. His schedule is worked out months ahead like that of a chief of state.

I had not seen Baba alone for some days. There were always a few devotees around him. After every *sangat* people flocked to the air-conditioned foyer of his inner apartment in the Delhi bhavan to receive instructions or just to enjoy the nearness of his presence. Also a number of people were always there to receive the *gian* from him. I had travelled with him, dined with him, attended his *sangats* and met him in small groups, but lately he had been too busy. Finally I had an exclusive afternoon appointment.

I entered Baba's room. He sat crosslegged on a large white-covered double bed and reclining against

a huge white bolster with his left hand resting on his stomach. There were five people sitting on the floor. The Baba invited me to sit on a chair. I placed my camera on the low table beside it and shuffled the pages of my notebook, waiting for the other people to go. Everyone left except zealously helpful G.S. Bhatia. An awkward pause. I just wanted to be really alone with Baba, who finally waved his hand and Bhatia left reluctantly.

Alone with Baba I again marvelled at his ordinariness. All the holy men I had seen so far fell into a certain pattern in outward conformity to their inward selves—lean or gaunt with intense eyes, naked torso and skimpy dhotis covering their legs and a shawl over one arm or a long ochre robe falling from shoulders to ankles; certainly ascetic-looking. But Baba Gurbachan Singh is portly and well-dressed from head to toe.

Looking at my face and guessing my thoughts, he smiled, "If I were a half-naked fakir, thousands of credulous people would have followed me blindly. Ignorance would have stalked in my footsteps. But I want only enlightened people in my fold . . . those who consciously seek the *gian*. It is easy to have a sadhu's garb and be a crook. Since my appearance is like that of any other person, people come to me full of prejudices. Utter disbelief. That is their right. What turns them into Nirankaris is not my outward appearance but their own transformation, a deep inner change."

I noticed a green tatoo of the words in Punjabi "Ik Onkar" (God is One) on the back of his right hand. I asked him, "Who tattooed that?"

"Baba Boota Singh," he replied. "I was six years

old, when he inscribed these words. Now they have a very special meaning."

We were silent for a few minutes and it was very restful. Then I remarked, "You are living in great luxury. How do you account for that when millions are slaving and starving?"

He answered, "This luxury does not affect me. I am performing a function for the people who will me to live this way. I am not over-happy in luxury, nor would I be over-sad in the discomfort of poverty. I remain detached."

"Is your spiritual throne a family inheritance? Who will succeed you? Your son?"

"No, it is not a father-to-son succession. Shehanshahji was declared the Guru by Baba Boota Singh only because he was the most trustworthy and enlightened disciple. I have never thought about who would inherit my place. Anyone could. I myself had no desire to be a Guru. I never imagined it. Previously I had never given a public speech. I considered some of my colleagues more learned, perhaps more deserving. But Shehanshah's hand on my head made the difference. After he crowned me he lived on for six years as my disciple. I feel in myself all his divine power flowing from me to my devotees. That is a miracle."

"Nirankaris comprise such a diversity of religions, nationalities, cultures, creeds and races. But what exactly *is* a Nirankari?" I asked.

Baba replied, "A Nirankari is one who has been blessed with a lasting perception of the Nirankar—the Formless. Adam was the first Nirankari. And all the great souls who have lived after him—all were Nirankaris. The line is unbroken up to the present. The Mission will live on through other great souls until the end of time. . ."

"What if someone who receives the *gian* passes this secret knowledge to an outsider?"

"He cannot. If he does, it will not reach the other person because it is not the words or the form, but the Light which has to be transmitted. One cannot be merely curious; one has to be a true seeker, to have one's feelers out. The noblest music may be transmitted, but it cannot be picked up without an antenna."

"Are you influenced by politics?"

"Our Mission does not take any direct part in politics. In present-day politics very unethical methods are used, which we shun. But if the system were cleaned up we might then take some part."

"How do you find Indira Gandhi?"

"Personally she is a good woman . . . very good tastes and noble ideals. But unless her whole government machinery is overhauled, what can she do?"

"How did you get started on farming and cow-breeding?"

"I always loved animals and watching things grow—plants, birds, animals, human beings—all God's creations. God pulsates in each of us, in all His creations. At the farm we have cows and two bulls. In one drop of a bull's semen there are three hundred thousand and three hundred bulls. Their figures, eyes, stature and shape of horns are sleeping in that single drop visible only under a microscope. Everything is pre-ordained by God and life travels invisibly . . . Some nonbelievers and materialistic scientists claim that God is only a subjective reality, the figment of fearful or yearning human imaginations. But God is an objective entity. All matter, tangible and intangible, is swirling in the Formless, Who is a super-conscious Universal Spirit."

I heard steps outside the door. Rajmata, wearing a crisp white sari, entered and I stood up because I knew it was time for Baba to go attend a distant *sangat*.

When I came out of the room Bhatia was waiting for me in the foyer. At once he asked what I had discussed with the Guru. Was it secret? I held his hand and answered, "Very, very secret."

In the courtyard the black Mercedes was gleaming. On its front bumper it had an aerial with a flag bearing the words 'You are the Nirankar' embroidered in blue on a cream-cloured background. Above these words was a globe outlined in yellow and embraced by two hands—one above and one below, held in the position in which the *gian* is given.

Soon Baba and Rajmata emerged and were helped into their car by Bhatia and two *sevadars*. Man Singh got in behind the wheel, near which a picture of Baba was reverently kept. Before starting the motor he folded his hands and murmured "Dhan Nirankar". The courtyard resounded with the slogan to the glory of Baba and Rajmata.

The black limousine moved smoothly forward with its little flag fluttering, followed by two Indian cars full of senior disciples.

9

From This Bottle

WHILE I STAYED in the bhavan I would go into the printing press or the office, the kitchen or the garage and was able to meet some of Baba's close associates, including a few relatives, in their working environments.

Baba's right-hand man is his secretary, the breezy, robust Khem Raj Chadha. He was initiated into the Mission on September 17, 1948. "I remember this date like my birth date. It's my rebirth date!" says Chadha jocularly. At that time he was a storekeeper in a government veterinary college in Mathura. He left his job in 1954 and started a Nirankari branch there. This he conducted for seven years and then shifted to Delhi to work in one of the Nirankari schools set up by the Mission.

I asked him, "Why did Babaji choose you as his secretary?"

Chadha replied, "I don't know... I worked with Babaji from 1963 onwards as a member of the Seva Dal Board. In 1970 he asked me to accompany him to Europe and appointed me his secretary. Since then I have been touring with him and looking after all his personal affairs. As the Mission expands into

more international branches the work becomes more complex."

Chadha, usually dressed in corduroy trousers and a western shirt, has a contemporary briskness, a modern outlook with a spiritual basis. His complexion is so fair that he could easily pass for a Russian or a Spaniard. He was born into a staunch Hindu family. At the age of five, he began experiencing visions of the future that invariably came true. Astrologers had predicted that he would become a monk, so his parents kept him away from shrines and temples because they didn't want him to take this unworldly path. Little Chadha made a miniature temple of clay and kept it in a corner of his room. As a young man he went to one of Lord Krishna's temples in Gokul and asked the priest to show him the image of Krishna. The priest asked which part he wished to see—feet? torso? or the head? Or the whole? He quoted a charge of two rupees for the feet, six for the torso and ten for the head. "I was 17 years old then," he said. "This disgusted me. Later on I found the Truth. Babaji has made me one with God and is for me no less than God himself."

J.R.D. Arya, respectfully known as 'Shastriji' (meaning well-versed in scriptures) is in the electrical department of the New Delhi Municipal Committee. But he is such an omnipresent personality of the bhavan that it appears as if his regular job is with the Nirankari Mission and that with the Municipality is a part-time activity. Born of a diehard Arya Samajist family, he believed that no other religion or thought system could vie with the depth and range of Hindu scriptures. He told me, "My elder brother was a tyrant. Most quarrelsome and hot-tempered and we were all afraid of him. Suddenly he became meek and pleasant and

honest because he took the *gian*. I was so impressed that I attended a few *sangats* with him and now I am a committed Nirankari."

Shastriji teaches Baba's children Hindi, philosophy and scriptures. Also he is attached to the Nirankari printing press and has written and translated many small books on Baba. But his forte is public speaking, which he does with passion, relating mythological and historical anecdotes plus philosophical knowledge in a clear resonant voice. He has accompanied Baba on many all-India missionary tours. Habitually dressed in a white *khadi* kurta and pyjama, he has the simplicity of a village temple teacher.

Nirmal Joshi, an upper-division clerk in the Railways has been looking after the Mission's publications for 22 years. He spends every evening in the bhavan writing philosophical pamphlets and giving verbal discourses on the Mission's principles.

He said to me, "The world worships a god that it does not know. I worship a god I know... We equally respect the *Gita,* the Bible, the *Quran,* the *Adi Granth*. We do not worship any scriptures or stone images; we worship their essence... We help those in need but do not encourage parasites; everybody must work and earn his living. That is why our service for the Mission is voluntary, and is very purifying."

Puran Parkash Saqi is the 'court poet'. Nearing 60, with balding head, refined features and a slight stoop, he has a cultured voice. After his mother's death in babyhood he was brought up by Christian and Muslim village nurses. That made him free from the bondage of caste and religious prejudices. He came in touch with Baba Avtar Singh in 1948 and lived with him for years. During these years he wrote down what the

Shehanshah composed in Punjabi and this became the *Avtar Baani*. Selections from it are generally sung at *sangats* and it has become a standard Nirankari text. Saqi told me, "For years Baba Gurbachan was a junior friend of mine. Sometimes we quarrelled. But the moment he became the Guru he passed into a different orbit of existence and I became his follower."

At *sangats* Saqi recites his own Urdu poems with the images of wine, *saqi* (cup bearer), bottle and tavern-keeper. These sensual objects relate to spiritual truths: The tavern-keeper is God, wine is the spiritual bliss and the bottle is Baba, etc. One such verse runs: 'I have not left drinking. I'll quaff my fill. I'll not leave the bottle; only change it (pointing to Baba) and will drink from *this* bottle!' The audience understands his mystical meaning and ecstatically repeats the refrain, "From this bottle!" with eyes shut and heads swaying. Saqi is a sure hit, the darling of every *sangat*.

Gopal Singh Premi, Baba's uncle, was one of the very first to be initiated into the Mission, by Baba Boota Singh in 1929 when he was a teenager. He looks after the administration and maintenance of the Delhi bhavan. Like most other Nirankari workers and office-holders, he does this free as a social service. All volunteers have their regular outside jobs on which to live; they contribute more to the Mission than they accept from it. Even those who work full-time for the Mission take only a nominal maintenance allowance. In 1948 Premi suddenly fell a prey to frequent apoplectic fits, but—"I was healed by the Guru. Some years later I was driving a jeep along a kuchcha road bordering a canal. It skidded, turned over completely and back upright again in a perfect somersault. Nobody was hurt. I ascribe such miracles to the blessing of my Guru."

Baba has two sisters. The elder one, Nand Kaur, is married to Kulwant Singh of Jullundur, who is in charge of the local bhavan and nominee. At his shop was employed a simple, hard working man, Gobind Singh, who was later married to the Baba's younger sister Charanjeet Kaur. Now Gobind Singh has an independent transport business and is managing director of the Avtar Lucky Chit Fund—a share-holding lottery system—which caters to the Nirankari fraternity. Baba's younger brother Joginder Singh looks after some important affairs of the office and Mandal's property.

'Almast' is Hardev Singh's pen name, which he uses as a Punjabi poet and a translator of Mission publications into Punjabi and English. In the daytime he is an official in the Indian Postal Department. He speaks in a low voice, very slowly. His strong arms and chiselled features make him look too young to have a grey beard. He took off his spectacles, placed them on top of the papers he had been proof-reading, blinked his large eyes and spoke haltingly to me, "Conventional religion gets hidebound. It needs constant renewal to release it from its own prison. I had instantaneous love for the Nirankari Mission. No conflict. Never in 25 years."

I asked him, "Are there no quarrels among the Nirankaris?"

He slowly put his glasses back on and after adjusting them carefully, continued in the same hesitating manner, "Quarrels and disputes are a part of human nature. Children squabble over a toy. As Nirankaris we still have shortcomings and sometimes small disputes. All rancour is washed away when we touch each other's feet. Babaji does not arbitrate because arbitration

cannot settle inner feuds. Belief in the Guru and his spiritual light dispel these dark moments unfailingly."

I entered a room next to the Baba's and found a short, muscular, half-naked sadhu sprawling on a mat while a pretty young woman pressed his naked legs. When he saw me the sadhu leaped up and touched my feet, mistaking me for a Nirankari. The woman went out and he sat down crosslegged before me on his mat. His eyes smouldered out of a face framed by a short straggly beard and short black hair. When I asked him who he was and told him that I would write about him in a book, he became more animated and free.

He introduced himself as Hari Mohan Sharma and began, "Sir, I come from a family of Brahmin priests. As a child I had a good voice. My father trained me in hymns, sermons, all the tricks of the trade. How to gather people together and how to keep them spellbound. I scrawled a tilak across my forehead, grew a fat pigtail, put on a saffron dhoti and a necklace of prayer beads, chanted *mantras* and sang. Simple people came, bowed before the stone image, offered flowers and money and shawls. When they went away I collected the offerings and put the money in my pocket. It was a very profitable trade."

"Why did you leave it?"

"My eldest brother, an atheist, would come to me demanding money and threatening me with exposure. I moved from shrine to shrine and to many places of pilgrimage. Sometimes quarrels errupted among us sadhus. I got tired of living a sham existence. Suddenly my brother became a Nirankari after meeting Babaji.

"He persuaded me to quit my profession and take

the *gian*. I did, but had no faith in it. My other brothers hated me for becoming a parasite on them because I had lost my former income. I began to think my new life was a dog's life. I was starving and it seemed that this world worshipped lies. I decided to return to my old profession, set up a stone image, chant and sing and collect money fraudulently once again.

"At that very moment I was summoned by Babaji. I had dirty, torn clothes and long unkempt nails. Babaji said, 'Stay with me.' Tears welled up in my eyes at his kindness. I sang in *sangats* and found a new meaning in the scriptures through the blessings of Babaji. For the last 10 years I have been singing in his service. Then he married me off to the daughter of a renowned Sikh. Imagine a poor Brahmin married to a beautiful rich girl! She is the daughter of Baba Sardar Santokh Singh in whose name the holy Santokh Tank was built near this bhavan. Now we have a son. I have had six foreign tours with the Guru. All my family is now Nirankari. I am at peace with myself. The woman you saw pressing my legs is my wife."

He smiled and his teeth gleamed through his black beard.

Man Singh, Baba's personal driver, is one of the personalities of the bhavan. He has a shaggy beard and a small paunch. Totally illiterate, he can hardly sign his name even in Punjabi. He joined the Mission 23 years ago as a mason and the Delhi bhavan was built under his supervision. He is a highly skilled mechanic, a carpenter and a photographer able to help in the bhavan's mini film division which makes short colour movies of Baba's activities for private and foreign showings.

He said, "I believe a man can learn to do anything

that he wants to. I have no aptitude for reading and writing. I am better at doing things with my hands.

"I have learned all my skills on the job. I have driven Babaji hundreds of thousands of miles, with never an accident. Nothing goes wrong when his name is on my lips. Sometimes in a hurry I forget to put sufficient gas in the car, but we reach our destination and only then it stops and will not move." He grinned, "Sir, cars are like horses. I can coax mine to reach its last gasp and stop only when Babaji has safely arrived... I don't worry about anything—not even about my teenage children."

"How many?" I asked.

"Three daughters and two sons. No worry about their future. Babaji looks after them."

He spoke with cheerful conviction, looking directly into my eyes. He was wearing a greasy under-shirt, striped shorts revealing his powerful hairy legs, and had a bare topknot. His body exuded a hard, vigorous, workingman's odour because he was repairing a diesel engine. His smile was very robust and shone through the sweaty jungle of his beard.

He continued, "I don't receive any pay, just some maintenance allowance. But my children are studying. All their expenses of education, their little pocket money and my household needs are met by Babaji. If I were employed outside, I would work for eight hours and have to fight for payment, promotion, grade, pension, security. Always surly and quarrelsome, as most mechanics and drivers become. But here I don't have to worry about anything."

Besides the regular bhavan workers I met several other important ones visiting from out of town.

Gurbakhsh Singh, the Raj Kavi or the Royal Poet,

runs one of the most prosperous and oldest *sangats* in Amritsar. Baba's eldest daughter Niranjan Kaur is married to Raj Kavi's son Sukhdev Singh, which adds another dimension to his relationship with his Guru. Tall and slim with beard neatly tucked into a string, he usually wears a knee-length raw silk coat over terry-cot trousers. He is the most openly inspired soul in *sangats* and is popularly called 'the Chum of God'.

The Raj Kavi met me with his usual cheer and in the course of our conversation said, "I faced a lot of opposition in Amritsar. My shop was near Harmandir Sahib (the Golden Temple). Some Sikh fanatics were against me because they felt I was preaching heresy right at the door of God's House. I had a small cloth shop at that time. One day the local bully, Bhana Badmash, a big ogre, appeared in front of my shop and started abusing me. He cursed me loudly for one hour while people tried to calm him. He had been hired by my opponents in an effort to provoke me into losing my temper so that he could use his fists on me. After one hour's constant barrage of foul curses and threats he went away. At night I wept and prayed and asked my God why He was punishing me through this goonda. After a few days Bhana fell ill and coughed constantly . . . perhaps God's wrath was on him. For six months he lay in bed. One day his wife came weeping and said that her husband was ill from cursing me and that I must go to his house to pardon and save him. My wife was against this because she was sure that it was a trap to get me where he would have a free hand to break my neck. I promised my wife that I would not go, yet was touched. So after all I went with the woman. Bhana fell at my feet, washed them and drank the water

and was healed. This is all my Guru's miracle. Then Bhana turned against other people and became my strongest defender. He took the *gian* and all his evil habits were shed, revealing a pure soul of great charm."

Raj Kavi has now won a large following for Baba. His gentle discretion and emphasis on service for over 20 years have carved out a special niche for the Nirankari Mission in the spiritual capital of the Sikhs.

Lal Chand popularly known as 'Laloji', is in charge of the Kolhapur zone in Southern Maharashtra. A sharp-featured, fair-complexioned Sindhi in white Gandhi cap, he has a melodious voice and sings and dances at *sangats* and annual *samagams*. His partner in ecstatic performances is Mata Bhagwani who runs the Nagpur branch in Madhya Pradesh. Laloji sings the high-pitched mystical poetry of the Muslim Sufis in middle-east Qawali fashion, the most wild and ecstatic, which often sends members of the choral group he leads into spiritual frenzies.

In contrast to Hari Mohan Sharma, who jazzes up his *kirtans* with film tunes and sometimes has a saucy glint in his eyes, Laloji retains the purity of the original in his renditions.

Attar Singh a medical practitioner, is in charge of the Bihar area. Previously he worked in Ludhiana and toured the Punjab extensively, healing people both physically and spiritually. He is usually seen in rough silk trousers and white turban and has a neatly tucked pepper-and-salt beard. He has had very little formal schooling but carries a lifetime of rich experience at his fingertips. Jagir Singh and Pritam Singh Durg share responsibility for the eastern zone and are spreading the Mission in the jungles of Assam.

These crusaders have the business acumen of modern

men, combining the spiritual and the physical which is one of the basic tenets of the Mission's philosophy. As Baba explained to me, "You must live in this world, like the lotus in its pond. It sends long roots into the mud for physical sustenance but blooms above the water unsullied by it. Attachment and detachment at the same time. While living in this world, you must not forget God."

Outside the bhavan I met more Nirankaris.

When I was having coffee at Ramble restaurant in Connaught Place, a Sikh gentleman came up to my table and asked my name. He had a strong face, a neatly tucked black beard and an orange turban. I answered his question and invited him to join me. He was an advocate practising criminal law and, I soon found out, he was a Nirankari.

He was Harjit Singh Paul, who had defended the famous criminal Dr. Jayanti Dharma Teja, a shipping magnate charged with cheating and forgery in one of the biggest cases ever, involving a transaction of 1,800 million rupees.

I asked him, "How can a Nirankari, publicly committed to doing right, defend a man who has obviously done wrong?"

He replied, "That is professional ethics. If you bring a wounded murderer to a doctor he must give him medical care and save his life. So it is with my profession. If a criminal comes to me for protection I must give it as best I can and fight with passion for him."

"Your two sets of ethics—religious and professional—seem a bit in conflict. How did you become a Nirankari?"

He told me, "I was studying law in 1957 when I heard stories of sexual orgies going on in the Nirankari

Mission under Baba Avtar Singh. I was a staunch Sikh and had been told that he pretended to be the reincarnation of Guru Nanak."

"Were you angry?"

"I was outraged! I went to see him to find out what was really going on. The first thing I asked him was, 'Do you claim to be a prophet? A reincarnation of Guru Nanak?'

"He simply smiled. That further annoyed me. He talked to me for half an hour, explaining that he was a messenger of Truth propagated by all the prophets and gurus, from Adam up to the present."

"I dismissed him from my mind as a misguided old man. When I made inquiries about the other charge I learned that the orgies were of religious ecstasy. I had no wish to meet Avtar Singh again.

"Then?"

"After eight years a friend brought me to the present Baba. Unfortunately I must say he made no impression on me. I neither asked for spiritual light nor was it given to me. Two years later I came again, very frustrated."

"By what?"

"Affairs in the Punjab. The unnatural tension between the Sikhs and the Hindus. I asked Baba Gurbachan Singh what he preaches. And what was this *gian*? He told me the five principles and talked with me for an hour. I saw around him people of diverse religions and communities bound by a common faith. An atmosphere of tolerance and goodwill. I had reached a point in my own inner struggle which made me receptive this time. In one short hour everything made sense and I joined the fraternity."

As I entered his Delhi office Ram Rattan Kapila

was sitting on the floor on a little rug discoursing on metaphysics with a thin, sallow Muslim apothecary. Both were talking and listening to each other intently, interlocked in their spiritual exchanges, trying to convert each other. I took my seat quietly on a chair and waited. The office was hardly six feet by nine feet and cooled by a large red-painted air conditioner. There was a map of the world on the wall, and a photo of Baba with his holy stick.

Kapila is a bushy-bearded businessman who looks like a sadhu. Partner in a refrigeration firm, he lives on a little farm away from his family and sleeps in the barn with the cattle he raises as a hobby. He was leaning forward and his long hair fell onto his shoulders as he continued: "Happiness is a way of thinking, not a way of living. Life keeps its balance in a mysterious way. If you acquire more assets, your liabilities will increase in the same proportion." Then he turned to me and said, "Nothing private. We're just talking about life. This Muslim friend of mine attends the *sangats*. Though he keeps to his religion without becoming a Nirankari, we share many of the same thoughts and ethical values . . . If I earn a million, I have to work hard for it and work harder to preserve it." The Muslim apothecary pointed out, "But many people earn without working hard. Look at film stars, maharajas, millowners. They work far less than stone-breakers and labourers, yet have millions."

Kapila replied, "I was speaking of the mental state. Nature keeps a balance. Think! The American film actress Marilyn Monroe committed suicide though she had money, beauty, luxury, fame. Yet a ragged labourer with no roof for his head sings as he works. Women carrying baskets of earth or bricks in burning

heat all day walk home singing and chatting gaily at sunset. Poor people are happy to sleep on bare earth; a millionaire may be miserable, lying in his air conditioned bedroom on a Dunlop mattress. It all depends on one's mental state ... What is joy? Just forgetfulness, oblivion. When I lose myself in contemplation of my God, I feel supreme joy and nothing matters around me. With this joy I have been able to overcome happenings which would otherwise have been calamities. To my understanding of God Babaji gave a practical shape."

The Muslim friend recoiled at the idea of worshipping a living human being and inquired, "What is the need of a living guru?"

At this point we were joined by a wispy-haired old man who looked like a Jewish scholar. He was Lala Moti Ram, a jeweller who owns a shop in Chandni Chowk. We continued our discussion of the need for a living guru. Moti Ram observed, "If a blind man leads another blind man, both will fall into a ditch. We need a superconscious being to lead us. Look at music. You cannot learn it only from books. You need a musician to interpret and explain ... If I were not at the feet of Baba, I would have retired, which means I'd be dead. Instead, I continue being active in my work and in his service." His dim old eyes shone with a strange ecstasy. "Once while I was busy with a rush of customers I was summoned by Babaji. I left at once, but was stopped by a friend's protest, 'You're leaving without telling your sons today's accounts? You're a bad businessman.' I replied that when the Messenger of Death comes to take me away from this life, he will not allow me to first settle my accounts, lock up my safe and explain

to my sons. I am simply rehearsing my departure from this world."

The four of us came out of the room. In the main hall where refrigerators, half-opened engines and bundles of wire were lying, a group of Nirankaris had gathered for their weekly *sangat*.

Mohammad Farouq who did a Hindi translation of the *Quran*, is a thin, tall Muslim with a short black beard fringing his cheeks. He wore a honey-coloured Gandhi cap and smoked glasses and chewed betel leaf. A scholar of Arabic, he knows Persian, Urdu, Hindi and English and was working on the sayings of Prophet Mohammad, sifting out the historically valid ones. I asked him, "When did you take the *gian*?"

"Three years ago."

"What was the need?"

"Need? . . . the truth is that I had no need. Babaji's followers, especially Kapila and Saqi, strongly felt that I should receive this additional spiritual enlightenment as it would deepen my understanding of Islam. So I reflected, 'No harm. If someone gives me something good, I should take it. After all, I would not be going into a tiger's den. If while listening to Babaji may faith cracks, then what is the worth of this faith?' So fearlessly I went to Babaji."

"And what did you get?"

"As usual, he started the *gian* in Punjabi. Then I requested him to speak in Urdu and he did so with equal ease. He explained to me the five Principles. I asked him, 'But if a friend of mine is drinking methylated spirit or eats opium, shouldn't I remonstrate with him?' Baba replied, 'You may point out to him gently that these things are harmful but don't nurse hate against him.'

"I said to myself, 'Good.' So all these points were clear and seemed good to me. Finally we came to the real thing, the *gian,* the vision of God which Babaji was to show me. The spiritual flash of light. This was the climax. I was eager, excited to see some kind of miracle—something like the burning bush of Moses, some charisma. But it was all so simple."

Here he paused and shut his eyes.

"What did he show you?"

"That I cannot reveal. I'm not allowed to. I can only tell you that it was extremely simple and that Babaji only said to me, 'This is God'. I thought to myself, 'Is God so simple? So unawesome? So near?' For me Babaji's revelation had the space and emptiness of a mosque . . . of a vision fading into my inner recesses. But I felt a twinge of doubt. Babaji seemed to divine my dilemma and reassured me, 'You will understand this slowly as you attend the *sangats.* It will all become clear.' "

I asked, "Are you less Muslim and more Nirankari now?"

"No. Taking the *gian* has never interfered with my being a Muslim. No demands on me of any type which conflict with my Mohammedanism. I attend the *sangats* and find the atmosphere friendly. At first I hated the riotous singing and dancing and jumping about with wooden clappers in religious ecstasy. All against the Muslim tradition, which is completely sober and restrained. But now something has loosened in me. I'm no longer so fanatic and rigid. I consider these warmly uninhibited Nirankari gatherings and all my new friends a precious gift."

The annual *samagam* is the biggest Nirankari event held every Fall for three days on the Ramlila grounds

in Delhi. A small township springs up with tents and corrugated tin sheets and all the necessary facilities. Stalls selling books, toys, pictures of Baba, *paan* and snacks are set up. Although the Mission avoids politics, it does invite national leaders to attend. At the 22nd *samagam* in 1969, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi said to the gathering, "The mutual love and respect which I see here I long to see in the whole country, but it is possible only if your teachings reach every nook and corner of the country. I am confident that you will propagate this faith of yours for the good of the nation."

I attended the Silver Jubilee Samagam in 1972. From a balcony in Connaught Place I watched the afternoon procession. Roofs and sidewalks were crammed with people. A sea of heads. Four richly painted and draped elephants emerged first. As they ambled by I saw people riding on each one and later learned that they were Nirankaris from abroad. The horses which followed were led by a white one carrying the white turbaned Commander-in-Chief. The Seva Dal men marched carrying flags and placards, shouting slogans and beating drums. Brightly decorated floats representing various provinces, marching school children, and the Seven Stars riding in a jeep were followed by a ladies' Seva Dal band playing drums and flutes. I heard a roar and saw a tall hooded palanquin with Baba and Rajmata enthroned on ornate silver chairs. As they passed, waving, a great shout rose from the earth, bounced off the buildings and resounded to the sky: "Rajmata Gurbachan Avtar ki Jai!" This was the climax to a four-mile parade in which 50,000 Nirankaris took part and half a million spectators observed.

At night in the large *pandal*, Baba and Rajmata appeared dressed all in gold, Baba wore a solid gold crown on his turban and carried his usual hooked ebony stick and Rajmata had a tall gold crown atop her sari-covered head. They sat on a round stage that revolved slowly so that the people could have their *darshan* (glorious vision) from all directions. As usual came the long lines of devotees offering money and receiving blessings. Meanwhile, to one side there was a series of dances and songs from different areas performed as an offering to the holy couple. Then Baba gave a short thanksgiving speech: "I am the actor and all of you are my director. It is your function to think and mine to act out whatever you decide. I am following your wishes ... It is all due to God's blessings that you honour me so much. Today I see the fulfilment of my father-guru's dream. So much unity and service. Nothing can stop the spread of Truth throughout the world." The devotees swayed their heads and punctuated his words with sudden gasps of joy.

Next morning Baba and Rajmata were to be weighed together in currency notes, the principal event of this Jubilee. The huge *pandal* overflowed with devotees, foreign spectators, photographers and television cameras. On the round stage stood a 14-foot-high balance scale. The wooden central pillar and the beam at its top, the two fringed and covered scales and the chains from which they were suspended were all gold-coloured. Two silver chairs were set up on one scale. Security guards armed with pistols and guns stood by as a grilled van arrived from the Syndicate Bank.

Someone announced over the loudspeaker, "His Holiness the God-chosen, the Unique King, is arriving!

Arriving!" Baba's black car drove up and the holy couple emerged. They climbed the steps to the stage and took their places in the silver chairs. The crowd roared. A battery of cameras flashed and movie and television cameras cranked. Big steel boxes were unloaded from the van and unlocked. Blocks of fresh currency notes in denominations of one, five and ten were removed and stacked by one disciple on the empty scale.

Devotees had circulated an announcement six months earlier about this programme. The estimate was that 333,000 one-rupee notes would be needed. But donations poured in amounting to over one million rupees, which were converted into new ones by the bank. When all this was piled high on the empty side of the scale, it tipped down so heavily that Baba's end rose up into the air.

The stage revolved and the crowd broke into cheers. Baba clutched his stick and laughed in mid-air. A microphone was raised to reach his unusual new height and he said to the crowd. "It is not these one million rupees that is surprising. Any politician or wealthy industrialist could raise that much. But the love and devotion of poor farmers and toilers that has gone into this collection make its value more than a ten million. This money will be spent on social welfare and for the promotion of peace. Not a rupee of it will be spent on my personal needs or those of my family members. That would be a sin. It is not my body you are weighing, but your own love and devotion!"

Hardev Singh Almast stepped up onto the stage and spoke out his on-the-spot composition of a Punjabi couplet, "The Guru has risen high and the currency notes have fallen!"

10

Death Without Tears

In Chandigarh, I discovered that some people I never suspected are Nirankaris.

One such is a robust gypsy-looking Rajasthani woman in ragged shawl and large breasts peeping out of her unbuttoned shirt. She sits on the pavement, roasting corn over a charcoal fire with a little straw hand fan. Her two children play on the pavement and one constantly nuzzles at her breast. My wife and I often stop by her when we go shopping in Sector 17. This woman is cheerfully talkative and if I am alone asks me, "Where have you left your white woman? Why did you marry a foreigner? Couldn't you find a Punjabi woman? Is she happy with you? Are your children brown or white?" This professional patter is to entertain me while my corn is roasting. One evening while I was there a well-dressed Sikh and his wife came out of their car and walked up to her for a roasted cob. The man touched her feet and she touched his. Then the two women exchanged foot-touching. Suddenly she was an equal.

Another was my drama student Mona Grewal, a post-graduate in art history and a slim, wiry runner

who dresses mostly in jeans and T-shirts. I found in her a streak of ethical austerity. She was most dependable and would do endless backstage chores with cheerful patience. From out little departmental library of select books on theatre and art, students were allowed to check out volumes themselves by noting down their names in a register. My 17 students scrambled for these while doing their end-of-term papers. Disputes arose and I asked that all books be returned for use on the premises only. When Mona brought back her batch of eight, another girl jumped at her as if she had taken them on the sly. Mona came to me in tears and said, "But see, I had written them all down in the register and your office clerk knew it. I can't think of it. I have never told a lie... I can't ..." and she burst into sobs. I calmed her.

Once when Baba visited Chandigarh and I was talking with him in his small room at the local bhavan while devotees slipped in and out, I was surprised to see Mona enter and kneel at his feet. For the first time I realized she was a Nirankari and at once understood her attitude in my class and the sense of deep honesty she carried with her.

Our eighty-year-old crackly-boned ayah Juni had pain in her back and was lying down. She is a hill woman from Sabathu and has the serene, deeply-lined, bronzed face of an ancient nun. Her nephew and his wife and young daughter habitually visit her every week. She blesses them, brings tea and they sit on the verandah, smoking bidis. But now they had not come for two weeks and my wife asked me to go and get them because they did not know about Juni's ailment.

It was burning hot; a parched glare. As I drove

I was hit by the *loo* and my car became an oven. Only the *gulmohar,* flaming among green foliage, broke the harshness of cement and dust. When I reached the house where the nephew had been working as a cook for an English couple, I didn't find them in their usual garage home. Then their daughter came skipping out from behind the house and conducted me to their new cubbyhole—a tiny, stifling storeroom just big enough for two string beds and a little cupboard for their utensils with the kerosene stove on top.

They received me cheerfully and made me sit down for some tea in this very very hot, stuffy room. They apologized for the lack of a fan, which they had always had from their English employer until his wife joined a year later and took it away and ousted them from the garage to keep her Alsatian there. And now the English couple had suddenly left for home and the nephew had no job. As I sipped tea with them my eye was caught by a large colour print on the wall. It was Baba Gurbachan Singh.

I asked, "Are you Nirankaris?" The wife said, "Yes." and told me, "Times are very hard but Babaji always takes care of us." They are still young, the wife more robust and her husband tall and lean with sunken cheeks. Their twelve-year-old daughter is exceptionally attractive. Her mother said, "Sarla studies in Carmel Convent. Last year a new principal came from Kerala and walked about the grounds, getting acquainted with her students. She saw my daughter and asked, 'Who are you, my child?' When I came to pick Sarla up as usual, she brought me to meet the new principal. She asked me about myself and my husband, what we do for a living. 'He is a cook and I am an ayah,' I replied. She looked up my daughter's record and

said, 'From now you need pay only half tuition for Sarla's schooling here.'"

The husband told me, "We purposely had only one child so we could give her good education where daughters of upper-class families go so that she have a better life. We work with joy for this. Now, though I have no job, it does not matter. I know I'll find another . . . and in any case we are not as miserable as was the English couple living in this big bungalow, always quarrelling and his sour-looking wife hating everything around her. What is the use of such luxury?" Thus he cheerfully philosophized.

Mother and daughter do the day's cooking early in the morning to avoid the scorching heat. Their room is neat and everything well arranged; peaceful. Is it all because of Babaji? I wondered. Is he such a spiritual force as to lend protection, cheer and hope to this jobless family trapped in a stifling room?

I told them about Juni's ailment and they all bustled to get ready. I drove them to my house and left them with their aunt, who slowly sat up in her bed to greet them in a family reunion.

A Nirankari friend of mine took me in his car to a village about seven miles outside Chandigarh. It was a tiny settlement of Rajasthani labourers engaged for stone crushing by the nearby factory. The hosting couple made us sit in a thatched hut and served us snacks. The husband had a close-cropped head with a tuft and was wearing a dhoti, and his wife's smooth, still-young face was in sharp contrast to her work-roughened hands with cracked nails. A *sangat* was held shortly after in the adjoining newly-built pucca living room with fan. On a cot, cushioned and covered by a white sheet and transformed into a throne, my

friend presided over the *sangat* comprising about 50 people including a few soldiers from the nearby cantonment.

The Rajasthani labourers sang their folk songs in praise of Baba, accompanied by a young man sitting on the floor with a drum. One man soloed in a loud tattered voice charged with emotion and all the labourers joined in a chorus. This hour-long perspiring *sangat* was followed by the foot-washing ceremony and the water was shared as a sacred drink by the community. Then a cheerful exchange of kind words as the hosting couple, beaming with joy, saw us off. On our way back my friend told me that this couple's son had just died and the *sangat* was held for his departed soul!

I was invited by landlord Teja Singh for tea and was received by him in his drawing room. I had met him formally but had never visited his house. He has the polished gentility of the landed aristocracy. His room was cluttered with photographs and a colour-tinted one attracted my attention. It was a delicate young man wearing a turban with a golden plume. I sank down on a sofa. Looking at my tired face Teja Singh asked: "What will you have, tea or coffee?" I had been drinking tea all day and was sloshing—rather demolished by an excess of this beverage. I asked only for chilled water.

Teja Singh smiled: "Then have whisky." I do not generally drink but accepted his offer. He opened a fresh bottle and poured a drink for me. "What about you?" I asked. He replied: "I am not fond of drinks . . . sometimes I may sip in company or when my son-in-law comes, but more as a formality."

Finding me hesitant to drink alone, he poured a

little for himself, and we kept each other company.

I was curious about the colour photograph because it had an unusual feminine tenderness. I asked, "Who is it ?"

"My son-in-law Maharajkumar Ravinder Bir Singh, youngest brother of the Maharaja of Jind. My youngest daughter is married to him."

My next question was the standard one of how he—a Jat-born landlord from Barnala—had been drawn into the Nirankari fold, the very dictates of which are against all the norms of aristocracy. Was anything troubling Teja Singh? Any spiritual problem? Any family misfortune? Any emotional accident or death or shock?

Teja Singh said: "None of the above things. In fact, nothing. I am not a spiritual or religious man as such . . . even when they chose me as the president of the Singh Sabha Gurdwara I accepted it as a social service. And I did some good work . . . though I do not want to toot my horn. Anyway I was eager to make some improvements in the gurdwara affairs because things were in a mess. I was able to help resolve petty squabbles of my colleagues and extend the building. It was 1949. Many Sikh refugees from Pakistan had streamed into Barnala and settled there. Their women used to come to our big house to get free *lassi* (curd-shake) which we gave anybody who came after our milk was churned. Every day we had enough for thirty people.

"One day a woman came and told me that Baba Avtar Singh had come to their house and that he gives a glimpse of God. I am not religious . . . just ethical. I went thinking 'No harm' and received the *gian*. I didn't understand it . . . but it influenced me slowly

because all the five principles are very simple, very rational if you believe in God. I know God is with me, in my heart. Any time I can pray or worship Him . . . even sitting on this sofa, because He is within me."

"Have your children taken the *gian*?" I asked.

"Yes. All three—two married daughters and one son who is studying abroad. My sons-in-law are not so enthusiastic about this enlightenment but they do not object to my daughters' belief in Babaji."

His wife joined us. She had sprained her foot and had a bandage on it. The same Nirankar-resigned placid cheer. Both were like gentle ponds of filtered water, totally unostentatious.

"My children were initiated at an early age," continued the father. "It helps if the foundations are laid early. . ."

"Does Babaji visit you?"

His wife said: "Sometimes he graces our house... once in a blue moon. But in the '50s he used to come to our Solan house with his father. At that time they would stay for weeks with us and Gurbachan would sometimes help me in the kitchen, making things in the pressure cooker . . . in just his shorts as a member of our family. Neither we, nor he even imagined at that time that he would be our spiritual guide one day."

An energetic young Sikh wearing thick double-lens glasses strode in and the three greeted each other in the Nirankari fashion. Immediately the quality of our conversation changed—as if a hill stream had tumbled into a placid lake. The newcomer was Amrik Singh, a senior official in Civil Aviation. A nominee of Baba, his speech expresses inspired spiritual

know-how in down-to-earth metaphors. He leaned forward in his chair and wove images with his hands as he said, "There is a shortage of cement, ghee, bread. Also of spiritual knowledge. If I announce, 'Come to me for ghee!' Nobody will believe me. And if I say I'll give it free, people will think me to be a crook. But I tell you, enlightenment is always simple ... like the first rays of the sun. Clear and direct and simple. Proprietors of institutionalized religion have made it complicated. Frighteningly difficult. At the *sangats* many people take the *gian* from me. I tell that Babaji is the fountain-head of this knowledge, but you may receive it from any depot you like."

Amrik Singh had a bad cold and his voice was hoarse. My host asked him if he would care for a sip and he declined saying: "I can't drink because Babaji has just proclaimed that we missionaries should avoid alcohol and I must obey him ... We must live the life we profess. People have come to me saying 'That man insulted me. This humble servant of yours could not bear it and thrashed the rascal!' I ask, 'How are you a humble servant when you speak so arrogantly?' Even humility can become arrogance. But a real Nirankari is one who is *really* humble... Guru Nanak's teachings shed light on the power and beauty of humility."

During this conversation Amrik Singh touched Teja Singh's feet every time the latter commended a remark. I learned that Amrik had risen from a clerk to the position of a high executive. His looks and manners were plebian with none of the starched uppishness of a bureaucrat. He was married but due to incompatibility of temperament they separated. His little son was electrocuted as he tried to put on the radio and his hand touched a live wire.

"I did not feel any deep personal sorrow because I believe that my child belonged to God, not to me. Relatives gathered in mourning but I did not give way to the tragedy. I held a *sangat* and served the participants in my best way."

It had started raining and was getting late. Teja Singh and his wife both came out and saw me off with extreme courtesy. Amṛik Singh came with me to be dropped at his residence nearby. When we reached there he invited me in for a few minutes to give me some books. We went inside and climbed up a circular stairway. He unlocked a door and ushered me into a bedroom with books scattered all over. His old parents and sister were staying downstairs and he had moved into this single room. He said, "My first love is Nirankar—Babaji. If today he asks me to quit my job I will do it gladly and serve the Mission. My second love is my mother and father who reared me and gave me education. And the third is any guests who grace my house. . . After working all day in my office I spend my remaining time in propagating the Truth. The *sangat* is my hobby; I have none other. After all, how is it better to go to a club and play bridge or tambola? Or spend late nights at drink parties? I find peace in my work."

He came down and shook my hand warmly as he bade me good night.

11

A Stone in Your Kidney

WHEN THE CHANDIGARH branch was set up in 1953, tiny *sangats* were held in Dharam Singh Shauq's small living room with hardly four devotees. Today the city has over 5,000 members, with a spacious two-storey bhavan built in 1962 on half an acre in Sector 15. The third Nirankari bhavan historically (after Delhi and Bombay), it is architecturally the most cheerful with a backyard of vegetables and fruit trees. Its front is a double-arched entrance with a tall, hooded snout creating the impression of a prehistoric animal with four strong legs. The interior is fresh and breezy with a high-ceilinged assembly hall decorated with photographs of Baba Gurbachan Singh in his coronation turban and another of the exalted Shehanshah.

Dharam Singh Shauq, in charge of the Chandigarh bhavan, makes his living as a Public Relations Officer for the Punjab Government. He is also an Urdu poet and a Persian scholar. Stocky and cleanshaven, with short, greying hair and dark circles under his serious eyes, his voice is pleasant and his manner gentle. Whether delivering a sermon at the daily *sangats* or on formal occasions—even in the hot days—I have

always seen him in a furry grey Afghan cap instead of the usual Gandhi *khaddar,* and of course with the white shawl of a nominee over his pastel bush shirt and grey trousers. "Generally we nominees dress in white—the symbol of peace and purity. But it is not a rule. Because of my Urdu-Persian background I enjoy wearing this karakul cap of fine, kinky lambs-wool."

As we strolled onto the verandah and emerged from under the prehistoric cement animal, Shauq explained, "Normally our weekly congregations number about 1,000 but when Babaji comes, more than 10,000 devotees pour in from neighbouring areas as well. At such times we set up an open-air community kitchen. Our local city members contribute mostly cash instead of uncooked food—atta, ghee, rice, vegetables—as do our villagers. But local wives do prepare and bring big baskets of chapaties and cauldrons of vegetable curry and dal. We serve simple food—no meat or eggs. But some of our members contribute truckloads of Coca Cola."

Later, two women came into the room where we were having tea. They bent low, put money at Shauq's feet and then touched mine before I could tuck them under myself. Shauq blessed them and I fiddled awkwardly with my hands. After they had gone I asked him, "How much money does this branch contribute annually to the central office in Delhi?"

"Around 20,000 rupees," he answered. "But that isn't all. For example, when Babaji came last month, over 10,000 rupees were received in one day. It took six hours to count them. This money is not entered in our registers here because it was given directly to him. Any *mahapurush* may come to conduct a *sangat* and all the money received on that day is also sent to Delhi

through him. There is never dearth of money for the service of the Guru. On the occasion of our Baisakhi *sangat* in 1970 when Babaji and Rajmata came to us, we presented them handbeaten solid gold crowns weighing half a kilo."

"Why?"

"To exalt him. We want to glorify him physically as we do spiritually. He is our king."

Often I have heard Shauq at Urdu *mushairas* reciting his poetry about love and philosophy with contemporary punch. But as he becomes more immersed in his spiritual work, his Urdu colleagues mourn that now he has become a *bhakta* and has less time to write poetry.

I had promised to attend one of the daily *sangats* but could not make it because I was delayed at a play rehearsal. On the following day it rained heavily in the evening and the main road was swirling with water in spite of Le Corbusier's town planning. I was not sure if there would be many members at the *sangat* but I drove to the bhavan and arrived there at nine, just in time for the ending. The parking lot was full of cycles and a few cars. I tiptoed in and found about 200 people sitting in the well-lit assembly hall and listening to Shauq's discourse. I took my seat near the door, reclined against the wall and threw a reconnoitring look. A grizzly-bearded man in white turban and a white shawl slung around his shoulders was chanting from *Avtar Baani* and Shauq was elaborating on it in his persuasive voice. He was comparing a new recipient of the *gian* to the sapling of a banyan tree, which any wayside goat will munch off. It needs a fence around it so that it can grow into a strong, tall tree with a massive trunk. Then, even if an elephant

attacks, it will not be uprooted. The *sangat* is the protection of a Nirankari 'sapling' who could otherwise be spiritually destroyed. But when he grows up into an enlightened soul then nobody can harm him.

The *sangat* concluded and the man chanting the hymns folded his hands and said, 'Dhan Nirankar.' Three people sang in a chorus to drum and harmonium. All the people lined up to *namaskar* Shauq, offering him money and receiving blessings from him as Baba's apostle.

While walking down a corridor of the local bhavan I saw a short dark man with greying temples resting on a string bed in a small room. I stopped to introduce myself and asked him who he was. He sat up, slipped on his loose silk *kurta* and invited me to sit near him on a wooden stool. He was Vasudev Rai, born into a Hindu family of moneylenders. In his youth he crusaded for the revival of ancient Hindu culture and was travelling about as a missionary promoting India for Hindus when his health failed. He had to give up his work and gradually became an atheist. Some years later a friend advised him to go to the Baba and receive a glimpse of God.

Vasudev's dark-rimmed eyes shone as he narrated his experiences. "I thought it ridiculous. God was not a packet of tobacco to be sold to me. Baba must have hypnotized some fools, and I didn't want to be one. Then one day in Delhi I ran into the jeweller Moti Ram who asked me, 'How is your cow?' I wondered, 'Which cow?' He insisted, 'The cow which gives God's milk. Go and taste this heavenly milk!' He was referring to the Nirankari Baba. This seemed absurd. All the same, I became curious and

finally went to Baba, who discoursed to me on his philosophy and gave me a glimpse of God."

"What was this glimpse?" I asked Vasudev.

He said, "It's an experience which one has to feel emotionally."

I asked, "Why don't you tell me?"

He responded, "It's like stone in your kidney. I cannot operate on you; only a qualified surgeon can. Only Babaji or his nominees are qualified to reveal the *gian* to you. If I tried I might tear your entrails—spiritually. Instead of curing your illness, I might damage your soul."

He continued, "I am a Bania by caste and had four daughters. I had suffered business losses and just didn't have enough money for their dowries and marriages. Moreover I was ill. Sleepless nights and my health was failing. I felt I would soon die . . . but Baba took away all my worries. Good matches appeared for each of my daughters, whom I married off in the approved Nirankari simplicity without all the expensive pomp demanded by outsiders. Now my health is perfect—physically and spiritually—and I'm amazed at my energy; a feeling of detachment that enables me to travel lightly through life. No more burdening myself with worries . . . Now after 10 years I am confirmed in my belief in the Nirankar . . . We are all slaves of habits and chained by social taboos, ceremonies, rituals. Individuals clash. Nations wage wars. People hate and snarl and kill each other. All because we are shut into our own little cells. Baba liberates us from these cells. I fell so free . . . It's scientific. I believe in thought-currents, the healing power of Babaji when he speaks to me."

I met Munshi Ram, a driver in the Air Force, as he

sat waiting for me one late evening after a *sangat* in the room where Baba stays when he visits Chandigarh. He was wearing sleazy striped pyjamas and an open-collared, frazzled checked shirt. He told me, "I took the *gian* two-and-a-half years ago and since then have been a changed man."

"How?" I asked.

"I did everything in my life—drank heavily, gambled, stole and burgled. But after I took the *gian* all these evil urges fell away. I did nothing to change myself; Babaji did it. I remember that day—a cold December evening when my soul was kindled with heavenly fire... I used to drink heavily, shouting curses at passers-by and falling in the street. But after receiving the Supreme Order I haven't touched drinks. Even now I have a bottle of liquor in my house which I never look at. Truck drivers are held low in respect and the officers shout at us. But now they like me. I have no hunger for things. My mind floats above them."

Munshi Ram's rough face had high cheekbones, a short stubble and clipped moustache and his voice was gravelly. He reminded me of Anthony Quinn in 'La Strada'.

"How many children do you have?" I asked.

"Three... I had four ... one I gave to a fellow Nirankari."

"Why?"

"They had no child. He requested me and we parted with our youngest daughter, then four-and-a-half."

"Didn't your daughter have any say about this?"

"We asked her and explained their need. With a child's impulse she agreed. Now she is six and feels a part of their family."

"You said you stole and burgled. What?"

finally went to Baba, who discoursed to me on his philosophy and gave me a glimpse of God."

"What was this glimpse?" I asked Vasudev.

He said, "It's an experience which one has to feel emotionally."

I asked, "Why don't you tell me?"

He responded, "It's like stone in your kidney. I cannot operate on you; only a qualified surgeon can. Only Babaji or his nominees are qualified to reveal the *gian* to you. If I tried I might tear your entrails—spiritually. Instead of curing your illness, I might damage your soul."

He continued, "I am a Bania by caste and had four daughters. I had suffered business losses and just didn't have enough money for their dowries and marriages. Moreover I was ill. Sleepless nights and my health was failing. I felt I would soon die . . . but Baba took away all my worries. Good matches appeared for each of my daughters, whom I married off in the approved Nirankari simplicity without all the expensive pomp demanded by outsiders. Now my health is perfect—physically and spiritually—and I'm amazed at my energy; a feeling of detachment that enables me to travel lightly through life. No more burdening myself with worries . . . Now after 10 years I am confirmed in my belief in the Nirankar . . . We are all slaves of habits and chained by social taboos, ceremonies, rituals. Individuals clash. Nations wage wars. People hate and snarl and kill each other. All because we are shut into our own little cells. Baba liberates us from these cells. I fell so free . . . It's scientific. I believe in thought-currents, the healing power of Babaji when he speaks to me."

I met Munshi Ram, a driver in the Air Force, as he

sat waiting for me one late evening after a *sangat* in the room where Baba stays when he visits Chandigarh. He was wearing sleazy striped pyjamas and an open-collared, frazzled checked shirt. He told me, "I took the *gian* two-and-a-half years ago and since then have been a changed man."

"How?" I asked.

"I did everything in my life—drank heavily, gambled, stole and burgled. But after I took the *gian* all these evil urges fell away. I did nothing to change myself; Babaji did it. I remember that day—a cold December evening when my soul was kindled with heavenly fire... I used to drink heavily, shouting curses at passers-by and falling in the street. But after receiving the Supreme Order I haven't touched drinks. Even now I have a bottle of liquor in my house which I never look at. Truck drivers are held low in respect and the officers shout at us. But now they like me. I have no hunger for things. My mind floats above them."

Munshi Ram's rough face had high cheekbones, a short stubble and clipped moustache and his voice was gravelly. He reminded me of Anthony Quinn in 'La Strada'.

"How many children do you have?" I asked.

"Three... I had four ... one I gave to a fellow Nirankari."

"Why?"

"They had no child. He requested me and we parted with our youngest daughter, then four-and-a-half."

"Didn't your daughter have any say about this?"

"We asked her and explained their need. With a child's impulse she agreed. Now she is six and feels a part of their family."

"You said you stole and burgled. What?"

"Useful things from the Air Force—petrol, wood, potatoes by the sackload and fresh meat. Anything I could eat or use or sell."

"Weren't you arrested or fired?"

"Many Air Force employees do these things and some are arrested. I was one of those who was never caught and so was considered honest in the eyes of law... I gambled heavily and guzzled liquor. Ate opium and smoked sulfa and hashish—all kinds of narcotics. But now I'm intoxicated only with my simple food and the *sangats*. Previously it was hell ... always quarrels, in the house. I would beat my wife. But never now."

"Did your wife take the *gian*?"

"Yes. Six months after I did. After seeing the change in me. When the *gian* was given to me by Babaji, I received this light in a flash as Arjuna did from Krishna on the battlefield and understood everything ... otherwise, how could an illiterate man like me—depraved and hardened—be transformed? Nothing else ever moved me. Thirty years ago I lived for three years in the woods with sadhus, eating leaves and berries and meditating. But it brought me nothing. No comfort, no understanding. After this I returned, took a job and a wife and built a small temple in a military area by persuading the authorities to contribute. But it was all a sham. Meaningless. Now I know that this body of mine is only a rented house. When I vacate it I shall go to my Eternal Home... For my Babaji I would do anything. Even if he ordered me to quit this temporary house I would immediately do so. I have so much faith in Babaji that his words are law for me. Whatever I have today—my peace of mind, my happy home—it's all due to him. I feel so

chastened and pure ... did so many wrongs in my life and now these are all washed away. What a relief."

One afternoon I went to see Dalip Singh Cheema whose house was still being finished by carpenters although the family had moved in. A clutter of wood shavings and a smell of teak and paint as the three Sikh carpenters in bare topknots worked on doors and cupboards. As I entered, Cheema apologised for the disarray and took me into the temporary living room. Soon I forgot about the clutter as his hospitality created a comfortable atmosphere. We talked for two hours during which his wife Gurdip, a school teacher, joined us with tea and sliced mangoes. Cheema narrated that since childhood he had been in search of a guru and always had a picture in his imagination of such a holy man as he regularly went to the gurdwara and listened to the *kirtan*. "I was very keen to meet a guru, a saint, a personification of God..."

I asked him, "What do you do for a living?"

He replied, "I began as a clerk and worked up to a branch superintendent in the Haryana Government. At present I am under suspension."

"Why?"

"There is a case against me."

"What case?"

He hesitated, considering this irrelevant to his main concern for spirituality.

He replied: "The government had invited tenders (quotations) for building boats. One contractor complained that he was ignored. An enquiry began on that basis. All the senior officials were absolved of this omission but I was suspended."

"When did it happen?"

"Four years ago."

"But why?"

"I don't know. Jealousy, I would guess. But I don't care."

"What are those boats you referred to?"

"I work in the Flood Control branch and we get motor boats for our job. I am a good motor boat driver and have trained people under me. For this I have been awarded many shields but they suspended me and so far haven't even called for a hearing."

"How do you manage to live?"

"I get a suspension allowance of half my salary and my wife teaches in a government high school. Also I get rent from my property. I am not at all worried about this suspension; rather, happy."

"Why?"

"The government pays while I sit at home and enjoy myself. Any other person would have run to ministers for recommendations, moaning about his innocence and begging for mercy and justice. But I don't. Babaji advised me to resign but I cannot due to the enquiry going on . . . which will continue for eternity . . ."

A small brown dog ran in and jumped into Cheema's lap. "Our pet. He eats only mangoes and milk. Yesterday I gave him bread but he sniffed and snarled, pushed it away with his paw and ran out to sulk on his little cushioned stool . . . like a child."

"How many children have you?"

"Four. Two sons and twins—a boy and a girl."

His wife picked up the dog, kissed it, coaxed it outside with a piece of mango and returned.

She said: "I told Babaji that we want a daughter. He promised we would have one but that she would bring along a son. I didn't understand but it happened

exactly as he had predicted. Baba knew my desire . . . the wish for a daughter is in fact a wish for Lakshmi . . . wealth. This double birth proved a double boon."

Dalip Singh said: "Every month I go to the office to receive my cheque, which I consider my Guru's *bakhshish.* There's no greater power than Nirankar. I asked Babaji 'Why should I run to little men when my God is with me?' "

His wife added, "All our relatives have turned Nirankari, at least 25 families . . . 200 people. My husband is now authorised by Babaji to give the *gian.*" Dalip said, "Mr. Gargi, sometimes people became envious. They turned against me in my office because I was flourishing. I own three buildings and my seniors and colleagues sizzle. They act as if I have taken bribes. Or have misused my influence as a government servant. But I ask you, what influence has a simple superintendent in comparison to directors and engineers and executive heads? I earned this money by the grace of Babaji and my own hard work. Any government servant can buy and sell property. I did it always with government permission, and paid income tax and did everything according to the rules. Perhaps this suspension is a blessing because I can devote my time to my spiritual life and service... I am a commander of our local Seva Dal of 130 volunteers and sometimes conduct *sangats.*"

Gurdip said, "People do not believe in God. But I have seen God in Babaji. A miracle."

My ears perked at the word 'miracle'.

Mrs. Cheema narrated the event, "I was scrubbing the cement floor of the bhavan as Babaji was to come for a *samagam.* We women of the Seva Dal cook and scrub and wash the clothes of visiting saints. I was

busy scrubbing the floor. My twins were playing up on the bhavan roof—22 ft. high. My daughter fell headlong at the back of the bhavan onto a brick floor. A *sevadar* picked her up. I rushed outside and hugged my daughter to my breast and put Babaji's footwash in her mouth, the only medicine at hand. My daughter opened her eyes and said 'Mummy, I have slight head injury . . . here.' I felt a bump in her head and we rushed her to the hospital. She was examined, X-rayed and the brain specialist said, 'She will have to be operated upon because the X-ray shows a concaved bone on her skull.' My daughter clutched me and said, 'Mummy, leave the hospital and take me to Babaji, who has arrived at the bhavan. I'll walk ahead of you.'

"Against medical advice I left the hospital and gave in writing that I was leaving at my own risk. I took my daughter to Babaji and laid her in his lap. He put his hand on her head, his warm pleasant palm caressing the bump for a while, and assured me, 'She will be all right.' My daughter recovered without any operation. Not a scratch on her head or a scar. Is that not a miracle ?"

12

The Healing Foot Wash

SOMETIMES I VISIT Financial Commissioner Hardev Singh Chhina's house. His wife Naresh is a Patiala princess and his house has some flavour of the old-time Patiala royalty. Photographs of Maharaja Bhupendra Singh and his family stand in his drawing room. Chhina is gallant, lively, extremely elegant with his trim figure and Patiala-style peaked turban

Once when I drove up I saw him kneeling at the feet of his peon. I was taken aback, then remembered that this is the way Nirankaris greet each other. His wife, son and four daughters are all followers of the Baba, whose large photo has a place of honour in the drawing room.

It was there that I had first met Baba.

My wife Jeannie and I were invited to meet him for dinner. We waited in Chhina's living room with several others in sticky monsoon heat. Naresh bustled in and out of the kitchen and twice telephoned the bhavan, where the Baba was holding a *sangat,* to find out the reason for the delay. She learned that Punjab Chief Minister Giani Zail Singh had come to meet the Baba and was making an impromptu speech on the need for

spirituality to combat today's lower-than-ever morals. And that there were massive crowds.

We mopped our brows and waited, conversing desultorily, knowing that these *sangats* are never strictly limited in time. Finally we heard cars driving up and stopping outside. Naresh and her daughters rushed out.

We came out to the verandah and saw a portly figure dressed in white, followed by about 20 men, some wearing white prayer shawls. Naresh fell at his feet and kissed them, followed by several others who had been with us, the daughters, and then the household cook and peon. We returned to the room and everyone came inside.

Baba was conducted to an upholstered couch. His snowy kurta-churidars and prayer shawl made his beard look blacker. His face was young but his figure rather middle-aged. Jeannie and I were introduced to him and he received our greetings with folded hands. Everyone sat and talked in subdued voices and cocktails of cold water were passed around. Even Naresh had only water. The daughters came forward with a garland of crisp 10-rupee notes and laid it around the Baba's neck. He placed his hand gently on their heads in blessing and they bowed out. It was not a party atmosphere; the conversation was a low murmur and many just sat gazing reverently at their prophet, who sat as if making a still photograph. He had been conducting the *sangat* for several hours and must have been tired.

In a few minutes we were called into the dining room for a bouffet dinner. Naresh served Baba mutton and chicken on a small table before his divan and he removed his garland. Everyone filled their plates and

some came back to sit around Baba. The conversation remained subdued. After the halwa dessert, a speciality of the house, Naresh and Chhina brought in a large crystal bowl, a jug of water and a white towel. I sensed a hush-hush atmosphere, a silent defensiveness, and felt uncomfortable—as if they would prefer me not to be there. So I murmured something about getting a glass of ice water and went into the dining room where my wife sat cooling off with cold *nimbu pani*.

We looked through the beaded string partition and saw Naresh kneel down and wash Baba's feet, and Chhina, receiving this water in the crystal bowl. She dried his feet and kissed them, then kissed the towel. Chhina stood up with the bowl and brought it before a white-bearded man sitting next to Baba. The man held the bowl, brought it carefully to his lips, and took a sip. My wife gasped and nudged me and I hastily said, "Shhh!" We felt like interlopers, even guilty about witnessing this private communion. The bowl was carried on around the room. Each person drank and then it was set down on a side table. Several men came forward with little phials, one with a dropper. They dipped and filled these, carefully closed and kissed them to catch any remaining drops before putting them in their pockets. Naresh carried out the remaining water and the atmosphere relaxed.

The man with the dropper came into the dining room. Jeannie asked him, "What will you do with that?" He took it out of his shirt pocket, held it up and looked at it with a glow in his eyes. "My wife is in bed with an eye infection. I shall put a few drops of this holy water into her eyes". We felt incredulous. I wondered whether this footwash was efficacious.

And if so, was it because of blind faith or because Baba actually possesses some miraculous power?

Another evening I dropped in alone at Chhina's and found a small get-together of Patiala royalty—princess Naresh, her cousin Raja Shiv Inder Singh and her mother. Naresh fixed glasses of whisky and soda for everyone except her mother. Chhina joined us, late from his office. Naresh said, "Babaji was kind to give me the *gian*. As a princess I was arrogant ... I was like a ship without anchor, tossing, unsteady. Now Babaji is my anchor."

Her mother, also a Nirankari, added, "As the wife of a Raja I lived a luxurious life, but all closed up in purdah. I was not allowed to show even my hands in public. The place was my whole world—perfumes and diamonds and silks—but no freedom. After Independence when the princely States were integrated into the Indian Union, I continued living in the palace as a widow on a substantial pension. The purdah continued, mentally and spiritually ... Only after I met Babaji did I become free."

Raja Shiv Inder Singh joked, "I'm half Nirankari."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I believe in Babaji's socio-revolutionary ideas of banning hollow rituals and throwing out taboos. But spiritually I'm still a seeker."

Naresh had emptied her glass and fixed herself another. She took a short gulp and said dreamily, "I'm happy."

Chhina said strongly, "Babaji is the tangible form of the Formless ... We do not know what we are. What are we? Have we any spirit? Where does it go after death? There stands the photo of Maharaja Bhupendra Singh. Where did he go after death? My

dear sir, a human being is like an empty corked bottle floating in a tub of water. Take out the cork and the air goes Shoooooh! So it is with life. After we breathe out our last gasp of air we merge with the Cosmos and the empty bottle—our body—is left. This can be frightening, but not if you have taken the *gian.*"

Naresh repeated, "I'm very happy."

"Why?" I asked.

"I have no inhibitions. How I sit, how I dress, how I eat, how I drink, I don't care for what people think. My life would be miserable if I did. What I do privately is my own affair; I only don't want to cause harm to anybody ... I was born with a gold spoon in my mouth and surrounded by love. But none of that gave me the happiness which I feel now ..."

The Raja observed, "There is a general moral movement. To my mind it is pure *bhakti.* I myself go to many babas and sadhus. You can't dissect these gurus with your little scientific knowledge. One hundred years ago it was unscientific to dream of a man flying through the air or conversing from thousands of miles or seeing on a tiny screen events happening across the ocean. But today these are all scientific facts that we take for granted." The discussion went on, becoming more animated with the drinks.

Raja Shiv Inder Sing's brown face flushed and his dark, opium-coloured lips shone. There was something about his lips that reminded me of the sturdy sadhus who are devotees of Shiva and have occult powers. I had also heard that such lips mean tremendous sexual energy. He went on, "We must not close our minds to what we don't yet understand. For example, I believe it as a historical fact that when Baba Deep Singh marched with his followers against the Moghuls, cutting

through their army, and in battle his head fell, he picked it up and carried it on his palm and marched seven miles to Harmandir Sahib and threw it into the compound to keep his vow. Khushwant Singh in his history of the Sikhs portrays Baba Deep Singh as merely injured to make it credible to scientific minds. But I don't agree. After all, modern Christians don't rewrite the Biblical miracles nor the Hindus their *Krishna lila*. They either believe or reject ... We must keep our minds open because today's spiritual miracles often become tomorrow's scientific realities."

This spiritual discussion made me wonder, does Baba Gurbachan Singh have any such power? If not, then why do people follow him? What is it about him that attracts people blindly, that makes them suspend their logic and become committed believers?

Kesho Ram, a contractor and owner of Shakti Bakery, said, "This slave of yours is an illiterate... I hardly finished my primary education and know only Urdu. When I came to Chandigarh I was drawing Rs. 50.00 per month in the employ of a contractor. I took the *gian* in 1952 without knowing what it was and not much caring. But I regularly attended the *sangats*. I wondered if there *is* any God... Once it was raining. A woman had arranged a *sangat* at her house and when I reached there, dripping, I found no one else except that woman, who was most grateful to see me. She gave me dry clothes, made me sit on the miniature stage in her room, and we conducted the *sangat*. Still I didn't really know what this God was. Again I went to Babaji and sat at his feet. This time an electric current ran through my body... I wept all night. Since then I have taken the service of scrubbing pots and pans in the community kitchen with the

flame of Nirankar in my soul. Nothing is greater than that... Now my business is flourishing. I started as a mere employee and now own many buildings... I ascribe my good fortune to the benevolence of Babaji. Even when he orders me to do a thing which I feel is against my interests, a punishment, I obey and it always turns out to be ultimately profitable... Only one must have faith in Babaji."

Daya Ram, a peon in the Central Secretariat of Haryana, fell ill after he had donated blood to his mother-in-law to save her life. Due to overletting he felt weak and could not get up from his bed for some days. His condition deteriorated into hepatitis. The doctors decided that he must be admitted to the hospital but Daya Ram was afraid and would not go. He waited for Baba's visit to Chandigarh and was taken to him by his family. He told me, "Babaji looked at my shrivelled face and said, 'Don't worry. Nirankar will heal you!' From that moment I steadily improved to complete recovery without medical aid."

Daya Ram is still thin, but strong, and is an enthusiastic member of the Chandigarh Seva Dal.

Harcharan Singh Nirman, editor of a family planning magazine, admitted "I was an atheist and had come to ridicule Baba Gurbachan Singh. But he converted me and later my wife. Now this faith governs our daily life. I am free from prejudice and inhibitions."

Asked how the Mission changed his life, he answered, "I touch the feet of my wife and she touches mine. My secular friends call me 'henpecked' but I believe in her devotion and love. In my office, when it is a question of the Hindus or the Sikhs, I do not take sides."

R.P. Puri, Inspector-General of Prisons, Punjab, says, "I mocked at the way Nirankaris greet each other.

But once I happened to go to one of their *sangats* in Delhi and was transformed."

An old friend of mine from Bhatinda is Gyan Prakash Sareen, son of a pioneer gramophone dealer and owner of a mod restaurant. A good actor-singer, he started his career as a young boy playing Lakshmana and later Rama in the local annual *Ramlila*. He worked in peace movements and peasant gatherings in the '50s and became known for his brilliant performance as Shaheed Bhagat Singh in a local opera production which toured the Punjab in the '60s. He was imprisoned for the alleged murder of a landlord's young son and confined there for a couple of years while the case dragged on. His elder brother Madan Gopal Sareen sought the blessings of Baba Gurbachan Singh. Gyan Sareen was acquitted, which brought him into the Baba's fold. Now these two brothers are among the most ardent members of the Bhatinda branch.

Young Niranjan Singh, Director of Transport for the Punjab Government, has large magnetic eyes and often philosophizes about God. "Communists and atheists claim that God is merely the creation of man's thinking . . . an evolutionary concept contingent on the development of human intellect. Others declare that He is a psychological state, that if you raise your psychic consciousness to a particular plane you become attuned to Him. But as a Nirankari I say that this personal mental state attained by meditation or yogic exercises differs from person to person and cannot be shared. Only a subjective experience born out of an objective reality can be shared and this experience can be shared and transmitted only by the Knower—our Babaji."

Niranjan Singh received the *gian* when he was a

college student. He told me, "I was much interested in philosophy and spiritualism and wondered what is the origin of this universe. What is it all? Who am I? Is there any spirit? All these questions bothered me. I used to go to gurdwaras and temples and met many fakirs during my college days. Then Babaji came and enlightened me."

"Have you faced any personal problem? Some personal experience related to Babaji?"

"Yes," he said. "I had big black warts on my left arm and these started spreading rapidly over my body. My cheeks and forehead were dotted with these ugly knobs. One day I sat in the evening thinking of Babaji... I have close rapport with him. Just by imagining him I could see his picture as if on a television screen... I said to him 'If my warts have any meaning in the scheme of your universe then I shall bear them. But if they have no meaning, take them back.' Then I slept hard. Next morning all the warts had disappeared. This happened 10 years ago when I was still a student."

Then he narrated another experience which happened a year later. "I had a severe attack of facial paralysis. My right cheek became rigid as stone... It was so serious that my right eye was in danger of becoming blind. I came home and immediately went to the hospital. The specialists were only able to prescribe a long tedious treatment. The whole side of my face—my cheek, my jaw, my eye—all felt frozen; dead. I constantly thought of Babaji and kept his picture before my inner eye. To the astonishment of the doctors I completely recovered in a few weeks. A year later when I was judging a case as Revenue Officer in Tarn Taran, a stranger came into the court room, looked

at my face and said, 'Sardar Sahib, I am surprised that your eyesight is normal. According to my astrological calculations you should have been blind in one eye. You must be under the protection of some superhuman godly being. Please tell me his name.' And I told him about Babaji."

Niranjan Singh attends *sangats* as often as his busy official schedule permits. But the Sunday *sangat* is a must for him. He said, "My life is in the context of Nirankar and therefore I find it purposeful. God and Babaji are synonymous."

Brigadier Manmohan Singh fought in World War II in the Middle East and then in the battle of Chhamb, the fiercest of the entire 1965 Indo-Pak conflict. He is a ruggedly handsome six-foot tall Sikh with curled waxed moustaches and uncombed beard tucked into a black net in the military fashion. I met him and his family in their Chandigarh home where he is living in retirement.

He had just returned from a six-hour round of golf in the hot sun. But he was used to worse exposures on the battle-front. We settled down and he began describing some war experiences.

"Were you never afraid?" I asked.

He said, "The Pakistan army was very superior in 1965. When an enemy attacks, he normally needs to have three times the striking power on that particular front. But in the Chhamb area Pakistan had nine tanks to my one, and nine men to each one under my command. The strength I had in me was of Babaji."

"How?"

"During my annual leave, just two months before the war, I was touring with Babaji. As we passed through my village he said: 'Now you stay behind.

I'll join you soon.' The moment Babaji left I received a telegram to report at once and I hastily drove to my headquarters. I knew my Guru would defend me against every danger... You have no idea of war, dear friend. One feels completely alone and has to face oneself in the trench. For that one needs a lot of inner power... Yahya Khan, commanding the forces on the other side, had named his plan 'Operation Grand Slam'—everything to be captured in the shortest possible time to cut off Kashmir's supply line from India and capture the Valley. At a time when everything was going against me, I kept my head up and even regained some territory. Not with armed force alone but with Babaji's spiritual force."

I was curious to know how this practical fighter had joined the Mission. He told me, "I was one of those who never cared to visit temples or gurdwaras. You may call me non-religious ... or better, anti-religion. One day, 20 years ago my cousin Bhatia came to see me and started talking about spiritualism and his new discovery of the Nirankari Baba. I cracked jokes and dismissed him. He visited me again after five years when I was posted at the Red Fort in Delhi and again talked about his spiritual discovery. He was so enthusiastic about having had a glimpse of God that out of sheer curiosity I accompanied him to a *sangat* ... and saw the Almighty through Baba Avtar Singh.

"I returned to my garrison, kept mum, and continued thinking. I did not even talk to my wife about it. That night I dreamed that I was driving in a mountain valley when I saw a man coming towards me in white robes and carrying a hooked stick with which he hit anyone who came in his way and everybody

fled. He came up to me and asked three questions: 'In whom do you believe?' I replied, 'In Nirankar.' 'Where is He?' I replied 'In me and with me.' 'Who told you this?' I replied 'Baba.' Then he beamed and embraced me. A year later I heard Baba at a *sangat* and to my amazement he repeated the same questions and answers. I knew then that I was on the right path and since then have continued on it without ever looking back."

He reflected, "Previously I was a terror to my jawans. A brutal despot. After I became a Nirankari I felt as if I were their father and they were my children."

The Brigadier may miss a golf game but never a *sangat* meeting.

13

The International Front

THE NIRANKARI MOVEMENT was begun outside India by a few Punjabis who had settled in England. For a number of years individuals held small private *sangats* in their homes. An all-England get-together took place on December 19, 1962 in Slough, 20 miles from London, in a newly-purchased house at 10 Third Crescent. This event was organized by Bhag Mal who had come to England in 1955. He worked up in various factories in the West Midlands industrial area which has the largest concentration of Punjabis. Since 1962 he has been one of the chief propagators of the Mission in Great Britain and is now president of the U.K. Sant Nirankari Mandal.

Since 1962 the movement has spread to over 30 countries, in which seven cities—Birmingham, Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver, San Francisco, Cincinnati and Hong Kong—are negotiating to purchase bhavans of their own. Apart from many local *sangats* there are 27 recognized branches abroad. These function independently in each country with their own president, vice-president, general secretary and other members of the executive board and control their own

finances, though all are under the same spiritual head—Baba Gurbachan Singh. In each country the money raised by Baba's visits to *samagams* and *sangats* plus regular offerings is kept there for the propagation of the Mission.

So far the communist countries have remained untouched, but Baba plans a future visit to Poland and the Soviet Union, which have some of the oldest and finest churches in the West.

The first official *samagam* overseas was held in 1967 in England when Baba Gurbachan Singh and Rajmata made their first foreign tour. In July of that year they flew to Teheran where Man Singh and a team of four were waiting. They had purchased a large Volkswagon station wagon in which the entire party drove to England and back to Teheran, winning chance converts on the way. From 1969 onwards Baba and Rajmata have flown abroad with their entourage every summer between June and September.

After Baba returned to India in 1970 he felt it necessary to set up a foreign section at his Delhi headquarters. K.R. Chadha was put in charge and with his fantastic memory has filed in his mind almost every name and detail relating to this job. He arranges press interviews, receptions, passports, customs checking, flights, interprets Baba's foreign speeches into English both verbally and in writing, and gives the *gian*.

Baba went on his longest 'spiritual safari' in June 1971, covering 20 countries in three and-a-half months with Rajmata, Chadha and Hari Mohan Sharma. He landed first in Bangkok and at Bansi Lal Chawla's house dispensed the *gian* until late at night and again from early in the morning. Tara Singh was to host

Baba for lunch, and his wife had been suffering a long time from an almost blinding eye ailment. That morning she prayed that her eyes should recover so that she could have full sight of her Guru. To everyone's astonished joy, her prayer was granted.

In Kuala Lumpur, Baba converted the entire Nanda family in their palatial residence and told his audience, "If an epidemic breaks out somewhere the authorities employ doctors to control it. This is done for community welfare despite opposition of the few with vested interests or prejudices. So it is with propagation of the Divine Light. A minority combats our attempts to eradicate ignorance and dogmatism but our Light continues to spread."

In Singapore the local Sindhi hall overflowed with spiritual seekers including hundreds of women who received the *gian* from Rajmata.

When they landed at Manila the state band was in attendance at the airport and two motorcycle police escorts flanked Baba's car at the head of a long procession. Chandu Mal Primu Mal Mato, popularly known as 'Matoji', arranged the welcoming function at his residence where lawns and trees were decorated with flowers and lights. Baba and Rajmata were conducted to an eight-foot-high silvery throne and the elite of the town gave an ovation. Clad in a loose Chinese silk kurta with long, loose sleeves, matching churidars and a golden turban, Mato danced ecstatically and wept at the time of parting.

Matoji is the owner of a manufacturing company turning out clothing and lingerie. He sent seven round-the-world air tickets for the seven members of Baba's team for the 1973 tour. Now about 60 and father of 14 children, he still has raven-black hair and looks

20 years younger. He composes devotional songs in Sindhi and sings and dances with his wife at *sangats*. He goes to streets and parks, proclaiming the message of Baba Gurbachan Singh and has converted many Filipinos. Now the words 'Dhan Nirankar' are a part of the local vocabulary.

Of the international devotees the first to enthusiastically convert were Punjabis, mostly settled in England to do factory work, and then the Sindhis, who have had a tradition of following Muslim sufis and Guru Nanak and are scattered all over the world. In spite of their shrewd business acumen Sindhis have a strong religious streak. Abroad both Sindhis and Punjabis have felt lost, uprooted, and it has come naturally to them to flock to Baba Gurbachan Singh as a focal point for continuing their traditions and cultural cohesiveness, besides spiritual renewal.

Out of Baba's many Sindhi hosts some of the most ardent have been Arjun Kripalani in Singapore, Chandu Mal Mato in Manila, Arjun Sabnani in Hong Kong, G.D. Khailani on the tiny island of Okinawa and S.K. Sijani in Osaka. They all give red-carpet receptions in honour of their Guru and conduct *sangats* in their homes.

Baba started his 1971 North American exploration in Vancouver, Canada, which has the largest concentration of Punjabis on the West Coast. Earlier revolutionaries settled there to raise funds for India's freedom struggle and from there expanded their operations. Baba and his entourage were welcomed by Daljit Singh Sidhu and his wife Kanchan. When Baba had visited England in 1967 the Sidhus (settled in London since 1960) had co-ordinated with Bhag Mal in organizing his tour. Then they migrated to

Vancouver and received Baba there in 1971. Pleased with Daljit's devotion, Baba made him a nominee to dispense the *gian*. Today Daljit, who received the *gian* himself at the tender age of 11, is Parmukh of the Vancouver branch and secretary of the Sant Nirankari Mandal in Canada.

San Francisco was Baba's first stop in the U.S.A. There he was struck by the natural beauty of the hills and the Bay and moved by the welcome of R.P. Choudhary, a young Punjabi bachelor in charge of the branch there, and Dr. Iqbaljeet Rai who had driven 1,000 miles from Wyoming to accompany the tour throught the remaining 7,000 miles. Iqbaljeet radiates warmth and energy. He came to the U.S.A. in 1967 on a Fulbright Scholarship, did his Ph.D. in plant pathology in Wyoming and began holding small *sangats* there in 1968, also authorized by Baba Gurbachan Singh to dispense the *gian*. Now he lives in Stockton, California and teaches at the State Department of Agricultural Education there. Also he is President of Sant Nirankari Mandal in the U.S.A. and his wife Manjeet helps him promote the Mission.

In San Francisco Baba inaugurated a Universal Brotherhood Centre (the term used for the Sant Nirankari Mission abroad) and then left for Los Angeles. There he enjoyed driving through traffic jams and running his movie camera and tape recorder.

From there a 1,000 mile journey by car to Laramie, Wyoming, spending several nights in wayside motels. While sightseeing in Salt Lake City along the way, an American woman, Miss Hope Skinner, greeted Baba. Long a seeker, as soon as she was told the Nirankari way of life she became a convert. Here Baba also founded another Universal Brotherhood

Centre—rather a triumph in this Morman stronghold. In Laramie he gave a special press interview and a programme on the local radio station. At a *sangat* held in a church the proceedings were conducted in English (Baba speaks only Hindi and Punjabi) because the massive audience was dominated by Americans. On this occasion Baba spoke against the two evils—ignorance and the ego—which keep one apart from God.

At Denver two American women, Norma Williams and Merchele Watche, with the assistance of B.S. Dhillon, made arrangements at the Hilton Hotel. The well-publicized *sangat* was attended by both whites and Negroes. Norma told the congregation about her vision of a new prophet two years before and that now seeing Baba she was certain of his being the Messiah of her vision. Baba spoke against the emphasis on materialism in American life and its unhappy results—insomnia, drug addiction, domestic discord, widespread divorce. He asserted that "no wife, however blessed with material luxuries, can be happy without her husband and that no human soul can be happy unless united with the Formless." He declared, "I am much ashamed to see the degeneration everywhere. Man has almost become an animal. Man's most glaring defect is his loss of humility because of his pride in material achievements. Only through humility can we lead a useful and happy life."

Rajmata added, "Filthy sewage water can be refined and dirty clothes can be cleaned. A laundryman never questions why your clothes are dirty; he simply washes them as is his duty. God does the same with our sinful souls, through the True Master who is happily before you."

They reached Minneapolis after a 1,200-mile drive with two nights of rest on the way. Rajmata told the large congregation how she had received the *gian* from Baba Avtar Singh, her former Guru now embodied in her husband. She went on to point out the lamentable human tendency to blindly continue old customs and traditions even after they have ceased to have any significance. But these same individuals whose ancestors had to travel on foot have no answer for why they themselves use cars, trains and airplanes. Rituals alone "have never helped anybody to achieve the Supreme Bliss."

On arriving in Madison the spiritual couple was taken to the home of Sarabjit Singh Jaspal and his wife Renu and mobbed by American and Indian seekers. In 1972 a U.S.A. Sant Nirankari Mandal was registered with its head office set up in Madison with its own executive body of president Dr. Iqbaljeet Rai, secretary Sandip K. Lal, vice president Paramjit Singh Jaspal and his brother Sarabjit Singh Jaspal as treasurer. Both Jaspal brothers are architects. Paramjit is married to a tall, golden-haired American who had also become a Nirankari.

Paramjit Jaspal drove the couple to Milwaukee, where a massive congregation filled the spacious International Hall. Ninety per cent of the many thousand were Americans, so the proceedings were conducted in English with Chadha acting as interpreter and Sharma singing an English song. Baba told his audience, "Life is like a train which stops at many stations dropping out passangers. Few reach the terminus, which for the human soul is union with the Supreme Soul . . . mosques, temples and churches are meant for self-search. If we limit God to these

buildings we insult Him. For example, if you wish to learn English, could you do so merely by attending classes regularly in a beautifully equipped building without a teacher? Certainly not! But you could learn from a qualified teacher even in a bare hut. The same is true of places of worship. There must be a Living Preceptor to show the right way of worship by leading us to God through first-hand knowledge of Him."

From Chicago the driving of the party was taken over by Sandip K. Lal, who had come from Cincinnati to serve during the next 10 days of the tour.

Twenty miles outside Detroit they were met by a procession of cars. After arrival at Jitender and Neena Mandal's residence seekers streamed in for hours. On the following day 85 cars joined in a procession to the television auditorium and crowds packed the pavements to hail the Living Messiah. After a two-hour programme in English, people poured in to receive blessings and many danced in ecstasy. Baba was so impressed by the devotion of Jitender Mandal that he made him a nominee.

After brief stops in Washington and New York Baba's party reached Cincinnati where a welcome was arranged by Sandip's wife Swaran, followed by a *sangat* on the local campus and a television interview. An all-American gathering was held at Lila Folan's home. On the third day Vasdev took over from Sandip Lal and drove the party to his home city of Hamilton, Canada.

In Toronto, already centre of the Canadian Nirankari movement, a local devotee Nandlal Tahiliani and his wife Sheela provided hospitality. Tahiliani is president of the Sant Nirankari Mandal of Canada. A dark, slim design engineer, he had initiated *sangats*

in Toronto years before. In the warm sun Baba was welcomed with *bhangra* dancing. At the *sangat* the first Nirankari Seva Dal Unit for Canada was formally set up with 12 volunteers under the leadership of Skattar Singh Sandhu. A tall Punjabi Jat, he is also joint secretary of the Canadian Mission.

Toronto disciples accompanied Baba to Niagara Falls and then to Kingston, where they toured the local islands. A Canadian dominated reception was held by Amarjit Singh Toor and his wife Kartar Kaur. Still in his 30's, tall, balding and stylish, Amarjit has a flourishing business in textiles and is in charge of Nirankari publicity in Canada.

Montreal was the final stop on the Canadian agenda. An enthusiastic welcome awaited Baba at the home of Surinder Singh, vice president and in charge of the Montreal Mission, he owns and manages a design and architecture firm. The guard of honour was provided by Skattar Singh and his specially-uniformed Seva Dal volunteers from Toronto. The Premier of Quebec sent a telex welcome. After ample coverage by French newspapers 80 French Canadians received 'enlightenment', with others left for later due to lack of time.

Baba dropped in at a yoga centre where a swami was training 250 American and Canadian residents. They persuaded Baba to speak and he told them that although yoga is excellent physical and mental exercise, in itself it is not enough to bring one to realization of God. On the spot many flocked to become Nirankaris.

The spiritual convoy flew on to England. Dispensing the *gian* in Southhall, the 'city of turbans', they continued to Oxford, Slough and Birmingham. Among

the most enthusiastic devotees in England is Sukhjinder Singh, general secretary of the Sant Nirankari Mandal in Smethwick in the Birmingham area. Along with vice-president Gian Singh, joint secretary Harmohinder Singh Upasak and other members of the executive body of the U.K. Nirankari Mandal, Sukhjinder carries on with great energy and devotion. Wolverhampton also has a Nirankari centre, where Baba was welcomed by the Mayor. A final grand *samagam* in Leicester and they flew to Malaga, Spain.

Spain, with its gay colours, strong sun, spicy food and Arabic-flavoured music has a strong affinity with the Punjab and Sind because both Spain and North India were dominated by Arabic culture for hundreds of years. Spaniards are extrovert and emotional like Punjabis. Their love for violent, bloody bullfights and wild dancing is equalled by their strong Catholic fervour. Baba and Rajmata felt especially close to these passionate people as they visited Malaga, Mellila and Madrid. On the island of Mellila the Sindhi business community arranged a *sangat* at which Baba said, "Humility is the only price for Divine Knowledge."

In the dark African area of Nairobi-Kenya Baba's visit comforted the Indian minority precariously settled amongst hostile Negroes and whites. His sermons on brotherhood, with communal sharing of food and water from the same glass, held a deeper significance for these ghettoed Indians amidst warring tribes locked in a death struggle against foreign dominance.

Although Baba's party landed at midnight, there was an enthusiastic airport reception by Mohar Singh Tagore, leader of the local centre. The four daily *sangats* were telecast by a Kenyan station. In one of his discourses Baba admitted that while in the U.S.A.

many Americans had asked him why there is so much religious conflict in God-loving India. He had to reply that people in India worship stones, books and animals and care far less for their fellow men. For this he gave the Nirankari solution.

Back in India, Baba and Rajmata were mobbed at the Bombay airport at dawn. In Delhi hundreds of cars, buses, trucks and scooters conducted them to the Ramlila Ground filled with a quarter million people to celebrate their round-the-world success.

During the 1973 trip Baba's son Hardev Singh, a young man of 19 who looks very much like his father at that age, served as a photographer, exhibitor of Baba's mini-movies on his activities and recorder of programmes on tapes. During the tour he took training in the operation of video tape television cameras. One such camera with complete sound and film equipment was given to Baba as a collective offering by all his overseas followers. When I went to meet Baba after his most recent return from abroad, I found a television set installed in the central office with a cluster of visitors looking at the morning *sangat* which they had missed. The Delhi bhavan plans to set up closed-circuit T.V. sets in the community kitchen, garage, press and agricultural centre so that while working devotees can see and hear Baba's programmes and speeches.

After each *sangat* Baba holds abroad, new foreign devotees ask him to bless them. They sit before him in small groups and receive the *gian* collectively, already prepared mentally and emotionally. Many of them feel that the Nirankari way is delightfully easy because it has none of the tortuous crosslegged lotus positions and long meditations prescribed by other Indian

spiritual heads. Its instantaneous quality also strongly appeals to the impatient westerner, used to readymade T.V. dinners, instant coffee and computerized knowledge kits.

Baba travels about as a living saint, admonishing his seekers not to wait until after his death to listen to his message. Most prophets are not recognized during their lifetimes and many are tortured for speaking truth. So far nothing of the sort has happened to Baba Gurbachan Singh, whose way has been smoothed by his predecessors.

During the last 100 years Indian political and spiritual leaders have found much favour and acceptance abroad. India is still considered the land of yogis, miracle-men and faith-healers and her culture is still haloed by a mystical glow that attracts western seekers in increasing numbers. The hippie movement with its rebellion against material glut and drug explorations for mystical experience expresses the growing hunger for spiritual leadership from the East.

14

Dhan Nirankar !

BABA GURBACHAN SINGH is not a miracle man; he makes no such claim. Human nature is such that it wants a spiritual man to do something extraordinary. Those who come to him expecting demonstrations of occult powers are disappointed. Baba told me, "We have many worlds and levels of existence. . . I preach simple brotherhood and remind the devotees of the cosmic superpower that is God, who works through his prophets on earth . . it is my duty to enlighten my followers and keep them constantly reminded of the eternal Formless who rules our lives."

Yet many devotees have experienced miracles which they credit to him—money mysteriously appearing when desperately needed for a good cause, jobs opening when there was no hope, character transformations, low-paid employees becoming millionaires, recovery from diseases and injuries without medical aid.

There is hardly any publicity of Baba's activities in the newspapers. The Mission prints its own monthly journal '*Sant Nirankari*' and also transmits current Nirankari events by word of mouth. The local bhavans are centres of information of every type for Nirankaris

who go there for daily meetings and the bigger Sunday *sangat*. Every Nirankari knows where Baba is and when he is coming.

A few months ago I came out of the Indian Coffee House in Sector 17 with a journalist friend and we saw the street thickly lined on both sides with people holding small flags. I asked the journalist, "Which dignitary is visiting Chandigarh?" He didn't know. Out of curiosity, we joined the crowd. Suddenly a surging cheer and slogans went up and down the road and the people waved their flags. A black limousine with an identical flag swept by with a retinue of cars behind. Baba Gurbachan Singh had come to address a *sangat* on one of his periodic visits.

Sangats are the essence of the whole Nirankari movement. Devotees can attend these bareheaded and with shoes on. These *sangats* have a gay, relaxed, country fair atmosphere, in spite of their orderliness. Sometimes they are held privately by some devotee on the occasion of a betrothal ceremony, a birth or a death. But they always have the same elements of devotional singing, chanting and reciting of poems specially composed to Baba, the *Namaskar* of a long file of devotees, the sermon and the finale—which may be an impromptu dance from the audience or exuberant singing in unison—and always the shouted slogans praising the holy couple.

Poets in these *sangats* are inspired devotees—well-meaning and passionate—but their poems lack sophisticated literary quality. They feed the crowds with elements of popular film tunes, jazz music and spinning rhythms, bringing the communication level down to the simplest and most plebian. At one *sangat* a woman sang; "Make this ocean an inkpot: Fill it

with the ink of the Guru's love. Write with this ink on the white sheet of your mind, And you will see God!" At another a young boy sang in rock and roll rhythm while a swaying drummer pounded with maddening ecstasy, "I did not drink from a cup or goblet. I drank from the tavern of these two palms" (referring to the position of the two hands when giving the *gian*).

When I mentioned my impressions to Baba he told me: "We communicate with our followers according to their cultural and social consciousness. Classical poetry and religion have to be reinterpreted in today's common language despite the scorn of scholars and pundits, because the scriptural language has become archaic and beyond the common man's comprehension. In every age a new prophet uses a language which the Establishment mocks at as unworthy. When Tulsidas wrote the *Ramayana* in the common man's Hindi instead of scholarly Sanskrit, he was boycotted by Banaras pundits. But after all, what *is* language? Just communication. We must communicate with our followers. Look at this table. Suppose I started calling it an apple instead? In one generation of new learners this four-legged piece of furniture would be known as an apple. Today we are talking in the common man's language which in a few hundred years will become archaic and thus be considered classical and holy. I do not believe in a 'caste system' of words. Language has to be according to people's needs. The parables and references in my sermons relate to existing conditions. *Sangat* programmes do not cater to cultural snobs but to milk-sellers, shopkeepers, cobblers. Just as a high Brahmin or a wealthy aristocrat comes down to the level of a

poor labourer in rags while touching his feet in greeting, so should language do the same."

Baba spoke about this touchy communication problem in his cool, unperturbed voice which never flares up even when he is questioned provokingly.

Apart from attending the *sangats*, Baba has small group meetings and gives private audiences at which only a few close associates are present. These are for devotees with urgent problems or for anyone who comes to him desperately. Baba is at his best in these person-to-person contacts—witty, genial, disarming by his spiritual logic, and consoling. I was able to attend a few of these private sessions.

A merchant in a gold-buttoned silk kurta hanging on his gaunt frame, with sunken cheeks and large sad eyes, came and sat at Baba's feet. "I have T.B. and feel like committing suicide. What shall I do?"

The Baba said, "You are unhappy because you have T.B. And you have T.B. because you are unhappy. A vicious circle."

The merchant exclaimed, "That's true, Satguru. I am unhappy. Miserable. I feel trapped."

Baba told him, "Everything of yours belongs to God—your body, soul, mind, property."

"Everything?" the merchant asked. "Even my T.B.?"

"Yes, even that," the Baba reiterated. "You must consciously surrender it to Him and then He can take it away. But you can't keep your money to yourself and give only your T.B. to God. In fact, this possessiveness is the T.B. A more fatal T.B. than your physical disease. God will heal everything at the same time."

The merchant sobbed, "Help me!" and bowed his head. The Baba laid his hand on the man's head and held it there. The sobbs became hysterical and then

settled into long, intermittent gasps and finally ceased. A great warmth seemed to be coursing into this prostrate being. It was not any charisma and yet it was. Baba's hand was transmitting healing kindness. The total concentration of his personality and power was in his hand as he quietened this tortured soul.

One of the most important teachings of the Nirankaris is equilibrium of mind, even during the most tragic moments of life. This their leaders not only preach but practise. When Baba Gurbachan Singh's younger brother, Sajjan Singh, died in 1948 nobody shed a tear because the family was peacefully resigned to the will of Nirankar. His body was taken to the cremation ground in a procession with band music. When Shehanshah died in 1969 the cremation was simple and cheerful according to the Nirankari philosophy that the soul of the deceased has united with the Universal Soul so there is nothing to lament. Baba says, "We praise the body but do not worship it. Only the inner soul deserves veneration."

The second Parcharak Conference of the Mission was held at the Nirankari bhavan in Mussoorie in May 1973 to thrash out some of the questions plaguing the fast-expanding Mission. Its numbers have swelled to over two and a half million in various language groups both in India and abroad, so that its organizational problems have also become more snarled. Streams of guests and nominees on inter-zonal rounds necessitate highly-organized central control with modern means of publicity. Thousands of letters pour into the Delhi Centre for which Baba must maintain a screening staff of experts to reply properly.

The annual *samagam* is now a mammoth get-together posing the necessity of setting up tents and arranging

accomodation for thousands, feeding them from the community kitchen and setting up programmes for three days. How best to organize all this? Also the problems of setting up libraries, mobile dispensaries and schools and constructing new bhavans involving millions demand a sophisticated budget and trained personnel.

The most hotly-debated item on the agenda was regarding food and drink. Some members proposed that meat-eating should not be permitted for a spiritual nominee. Baba retorted, "What about Muslims and Eskimos? Will you ban them from your fraternity? And how can I disapprove of meat when I take it myself!" The hardliners insisted that liquor should be banned for all Nirankaris. This sanctimonious trend clashes with the third Principle forbidding any taboo on food habits as having nothing to do with one's spiritual health. Baba Boota Singh crusaded against such taboos and drank openly. Baba Avtar Singh also sometimes served his disciples whisky with his own hands. Why this reversion to the puritanical harshness of certain religions which consider any drinking sinful? A few preachers who had indulged in excessive drinking had brought a bad name to the Mission. Where to draw the line? Baba Gurbachan Singh reminded them, "The Nirankari Mission is for liberation. I will not change our third Principle because it is on the basis of our Principles that our Fraternity is spreading. You may disapprove of wine, but it is the only drink for Christians at their communions. We cannot start imposing taboos. But I suggest that those who do not know how to hold their drinks should stop drinking. If our missionaries get drunk they are a slur on our Mission. So they should not drink.

This caution applies only to our Indian nominees."

Critics question the 'epicurean' ways of Nirankaris. "They smoke and are therefore a curse on Sikhism!" roars an Akali. "They permit beef-eating whereas we waged wars against Muslims for this!" thunders a Rajput Hindu. "They are too liberal!" declares a liberal. But the Baba dismisses theses as the invectives of misguided souls.

Eighty per cent of Nirankaris are Hindus of diverse castes and sects, about seven per cent are Sikhs and the remainder are from other religions. Many Sikhs regard Nirankaris as heretics. They don't see why anyone should turn to Baba Gurbachan Singh when Guru Gobind Singh had proclaimed that no one after him except the Holy Granth should be worshipped. Therefore the Sikhs resent Baba's encroachments on their community. Not so with the Hindus, who have always worshipped legions of gods and goddesses and saints and always have room for more. Most of the major religions have become sluggish or rigid and have lost their intial crusading zeal. Nirankaris are, however, loaded with it. Not only their nominee-apostles but every devotee feels it is his sacred duty to win converts.

The finances of the growing Nirankari spiritual empire are highly-organized. Millions of rupees are placed at Baba's feet at *samagams, sangats* and private gatherings. Even garlands of currency notes are placed around his neck. Hundreds and thousands more are offered to travelling nominees and at stray moments when a nominee might just be having tea at his bhavan or house. Babu Mahadev was sitting with me at his residence after lunch when a Nirankari came up on an errand and first placed a five-rupee note at

his feet. Babuji picked it up and put it in his pocket. I had seen similar incidents in Bombay, Chandigarh, Patiala and Amritsar homes. I asked Babuji, "I have seen bundles of currency notes being collected and carried away from your public functions. You have so many bhavans and congregations and nominees receiving rupees. Are *all* these sent to Babaji? Does nobody in the process keep back or snatch a few?"

"That's not possible," he said. "We can't even dream of it. Every rupee is accounted for and audited. For example, this five-rupee note which I just received will go to the Delhi bhavan and be entered into the account books. We have experts for just this purpose. But above all is the complete honesty of everyone involved. As the king, so the courtiers. Everything starts from the head. If the head is corrupt everything goes wrong and corruption percolates down to the humblest. In our Mission Babaji sets the tone of honesty and selflessness and we all follow."

The Nirankari movement began as a liberating force against rituals and taboos and the rigidity of organized religions. Yet the Nirankari Mission could soon become a new religion. In the last few years it has vastly increased its influence and has by now standardized certain procedures—the daily and weekly *sangats,* the footwashing ceremony, the *gian,* the special terminology and slogans and the white prayer shawl worn by apostles. Just now this Fraternity has tremendous zeal and good will and total dedication, but could easily become institutionalized if its members do not consciously guard against this danger. There have been stray cases when a recipient of the *gian* felt disillusioned and left the fold, denouncing it. But such rebels could not draw away any other devotees

because this monolithic spiritual order has no cracks.

As industrialization invades villages, cracking up traditional values and morals, the patriarchal head has lost his absolute authority and is less of a protective father. Brothers and sisters compete with each other for education and for inheritance. In this cut-throat brutalization, people are all the more hungry for a kind word, for someone to speak reassuringly and listen to them. They yearn for a more personalized contact with God. Confession is cathartic. Indian religions have no confessional set-up. But the Nirankari Baba is for his followers priest, protector, father and healer.

Hindus as a rule do not touch each other. Instead of hugs and handshakes they customarily *Namaskar* each other from a distance. The human touch is shunned as contaminating. This physical rejection, rooted in the Hindu psyche for centuries, is born out of a sense of extreme caste and class consciousness. Many modern Hindus consider this behaviour a sound clinical precaution. The Nirankaris smash this idea by going to the loving extreme. When I pointed out to a Nirankari doctor, "You wash the feet of your apostles and sip this water as a holy nectar. Isn't that unhygienic?"

He replied, "The food you eat in hotels—do you know how it's prepared? Sweat-soaked cooks mix the chapati dough with their feet by treading on it. And what about inhaling millions of germs in crowded cities? And people rubbing their bodies in jam sessions in smoky discotheques? You dance with a stranger and are eager to kiss her—what about hygiene then? It's love, my dear Sir. All love. Very healing. The touch of another Nirankari, even a stranger, is a pleasure because my faith transforms it into a blessing. It is physiotherapy and love of God."

The outside world is sizzling with concern about the 'feminine mystique'; women's lib; who should rule the roost. Not so among the Nirankaris. If a husband joins the Mission his wife usually does too, and vice versa. Husbands and wives propagating and serving the Mission mostly work together on a complementary basis. This joint committment binds husband and wife at all levels—social, spiritual, sexual, familial. It provides a pinpoint focus of purpose to which all their activities relate. Khem Raj Chadha said, "If there is a disagreement or quarrel between them, their daily greeting of touching each other's feet heals them. Or the word 'Nirankar' used as a talisman restores harmony and faith because this word, during the Mission's 44 years, has not lost its power as have other holy expressions and names used today even as swear words. By working together Nirankari husbands and wives accomplish far more than is possible with ego-induced competition or traditional separation of roles."

Baba has touched millions of bowed heads during his ten years of Gurudom. Every devotee has physical access to him. He has blessed many weddings with the simple ceremony of garlanding and a few rupees' expense. No display of riches at weddings. No dowries. If a father wishes to give part of his ancestral property to his daughter he may do so, but without flaunting it.

Baba Gurbachan Singh says, "Our movement is the first major break from religious and caste barriers. We encourage inter-caste and inter-province marriages and these prove very harmonious. One who becomes a Nirankari is not required to abandon his religion; he simply becomes a member of our spiritual fraternity that embraces all religions."

The Baba was assassinated on the 24th April, 1980, at the Nirankari Colony, Delhi.